

Heroines, Victims and Survivors: Female Minors as Active Agents in Films about African Colonial and Postcolonial Conflicts.

by
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Abstract

This thesis analyses the representations of girls as active agents in fictional films about African colonial and postcolonial conflicts. Representations of these girls are located within local and global contexts, and viewed through an intersectional lens that sees girls as trebly marginalised as “female,” “child soldiers” and “African.” A cultural approach that combines textual and contextual analyses is used to draw links between the case study films and the societies within which they are produced and consumed. The thesis notes the shift that occurs between the representations of girls in anti-colonial struggles and postcolonial wars as a demonstration of ideological underpinnings that link these representations to their socio-political contexts.

For films about African anti-colonial conflicts, the author looks at *Sarafina!* (Darrell Roodt, 1992) and *Flame* (Ingrid Sinclair, 1996). Representations in the optimistic *Sarafina!* are used to mark a trajectory that leads to the representations in *Flame*, which is characterised by postcolonial disillusionment. On the other hand, *Heart of Fire/Feuerherz* (Luigi Falorni, 2008) and *War Witch/Rebelle* (Kim Nguyen, 2012), which are produced within the context of postcolonial wars, demonstrate the influences of global politics on the representations of the African girl and the wars she is caught up in.

The thesis finds that films about anti-colonial wars are largely presented from an African perspective, although that perspective is at times male and more symbolic than an exploration of girls’ multiple voices and subject positions. In these films, girls who participate in the conflicts are often represented as brave and heroic, a powerful indication of the moral strength of the African nationalists’ cause. On the contrary, films about African postcolonial

wars largely represent girls as innocent and sometimes helpless victims of these “unjust wars.”

The representations in the four case study films are significant in bringing to the fore some of the experiences of girls in African political conflicts. However, they also indicate that sometimes representations of girls become signifiers of ideas relating to local and global socio-political, economic, and other interests rather than a means for expressing the voices of the girls that these films purport to represent.

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Chapter One

Representing the Female Child in African Political Conflicts

Introduction

Postcolonial representations of girls who participated in anti-colonial conflicts are influenced by a set of metaconflict dynamics that are different from those that influence representations of girl soldiers in on-going postcolonial conflicts.¹ In wars that are widely perceived as justified, such as the anti-colonial conflicts, girls who participate are often seen as brave and heroic.² But, in many African postcolonial wars, girls are largely understood as victims of unjust wars (Honwana, 2006: 75). These representations are often “authenticated” through links to official history or popular memory, or a combination of both, despite the fact that the represented girls may not have control over how these histories are constructed.³ The narratives are therefore shaped by a complex mixture of many, and sometimes competing perspectives from different sources as various people, including filmmakers, the ruling elite, and ordinary citizens, try to make sense of the conflicts and their participants. Because of

¹ When writing about the anti-apartheid conflict in South Africa, which, to some, may seem clearly defined, Donald L. Horowitz states that there were two types of conflicts: the conflict itself and the metaconflict (1991: 2). Horowitz defines the metaconflict as ‘the conflict over the nature of the conflict’ (ibid.).

² The term “girls” is used to refer to ‘female-identified children’ (Handyside & Taylor-Jones, 2016: 10). Girls are also referred to as female minors within the context of this dissertation.

³ Popular memory is often considered as more democratic than official history because it involves a bottom-up process that includes voices from the less powerful, whereas official history is seen as constructed through a top-down process by those in power (Gabriel, 1989: 53-54). An exploration of the definitions of official history and popular memory as well as the complex relationship between the two is to be found under the “concepts” section later on in this chapter.

this, individualised experiences are often subordinated as official history and popular memory compete for dominance. Additionally, in these representations there are two contentious issues to be dealt with: the female soldier and the child soldier, which are merged into one. As a result, girls who participate in African political conflicts are often trebly marginalised as “female,” “child soldiers” and “African.”

This thesis considers the cinematic representations of female minors or girls who participate in African political conflicts. It focuses on four films: *Sarafina!* (Darrell James Roodt, 1992), *Flame* (Ingrid Sinclair, 1996), *Heart of Fire/Feuerherz* (Luigi Falorni, 2008) and *War Witch/Rebelle* (Kim Nguyen, 2012). The aim is to demonstrate that filmmakers’ representations are highly influenced by their films’ production and consumption contexts, including the political environment, historical context as well as funding conditions. The voices of the girls are therefore subordinated to many other interests within the complex network of relationships that link film production processes to the society.

Females and War

In her book, *Three Guineas*, first published in 1938, Virginia Woolf wrote that ‘for though many instincts are held more or less in common by both sexes, to fight has always been the man’s habit, not the woman’s’ (Woolf, 2008: 158). Susan Sontag later summarised the ideas in *Three Guineas* and expressed them in very graphic terms when she wrote that Woolf suggested ‘war is a man’s game – that the killing machine has a gender, and it is male’ (2004: 5). But, over the years, the participation of women as armed combatants in such conflicts as the African anti-colonial wars has proven that women can also be “killing machines,” making

it clear that war is not just the domain of men.⁴ Similarly, although the most popular image of a child soldier is that of a boy (Taylor-Jones, 2016), experiences such as those represented in Senait Mehari's memoir, *Heart of Fire: From Child Soldier to Soul Singer* (2006), are making it increasingly clear that the story of a child soldier is not just that of a boy. Documentaries such as *Grace, Milly, Lucy: Child Soldiers* (Raymonde Provencher, 2010) also show that girls have their own war stories too. These stories go beyond the idea that girls are simply victims of irregular soldiers or part of 'civilian populations who are displaced from their homes or injured by landmines' (Honwana, 2006: 75). However, Woolf is correct in implying that war experiences are gendered.⁵ Girls experience war differently from boys. The experiences of girls in political conflicts 'have some distinctive characteristics related to both their youth and their gender' (Honwana, 2006: 75). In addition, different girls have different war experiences.

It is estimated that 30-40% of child combatants in recent African conflicts are girls (Denov, 2010: 13; Taylor-Jones, 2016: 179). But despite such significant involvement, a large majority of films focus on the male experience (Taylor-Jones, 2016: 179). The existence of the four films under study is testament to the fact that in recent years there have been attempts to highlight the experiences of girls who participate in political conflicts. Handyside

⁴ This may be a reflection of the differences between the experiences of African women within the context of colonial Africa and those of European women in Europe, whom Woolf refers to. As Lizelle Bisschoff notes, African women may face some battles that are similar to those faced by their Euro-American counterparts, but they also deal 'with issues specific to their own cultural environments' (2010: 47).

⁵ The term "gendered" is derived from the word "gender," which refers to 'the socially constructed differences between men and women, and boys and girls' (Mazurana et al., 2002: 98). These constructed differences influence the determination of the 'social roles of men, women, boys, and girls, and [the] relationships between and among them' (ibid.). Gendered experiences reflect the differences in experiences as influenced by a person's gender.

and Taylor-Jones have noted that ‘more notice is now being taken of girls, in feminist politics, in film studies, and in media studies’ (2016: 4). This thesis argues that while representations of African girl soldiers in fictional films may be influenced by feminist ideas,⁶ they are also heavily tempered with other interests that may suppress the voices of the girls that these films seek to represent. These include both local and global political, economic, and social interests. The thesis explores the various factors that make it difficult to create a less adulterated voice for the girls who participate in African political conflicts, as well as the ideological implications of filmmakers’ stylistic choices.

This thesis will not attempt to determine what the authentic voice of girls involved in political conflicts is or should be. As Kenneth Harrow argues, ‘there is no site where one can stand from which to evaluate the authentic’ (2007: xii). Rather, it aims to acknowledge that there is a maze of interests, including those of the girls themselves, which inhibit access to the various experiences of girls who participate in political conflicts.

The Case Study Films

The four films under study represent female minors’ experiences in political conflicts that took place in Zimbabwe (*Flame*), South Africa (*Sarafina!*) and Eritrea (*Heart of Fire*). *War Witch* does not specify the African country in which it is set, but Kate Taylor-Jones argues that the fact that the film was filmed in the Democratic Republic of Congo and uses Angolan

⁶ ‘Lai Olurode argues that although there are many versions of feminism, it ‘is concerned with women’s yearnings for freedom from oppression and from other forms of rights violations’ (2013: 11). African feminist thought is ‘rooted in an African context and culture,’ which takes into account issues relating to racial struggles and colonial histories (Giruzzi, 2015: 81). In reference to film studies, Lindiwe Dovey notes that ‘the creation of perfect women has never, of course, been the aim of feminism,’ (2012: 20). She states that ‘the aim of feminism has been to establish the humanity of women – women’s fundamental equality to men where human rights are concerned’ (ibid.).

music links ‘the film to these two respective conflict regions’ (2016: 189). Despite these links, *War Witch*, in many ways, can be seen as representing the general experiences of African child soldiers in African postcolonial conflicts. In his interview with Wilson Morales, Kim Nguyen, the director of the film, mentions that in his research, he read about Angola and Sierra Leone, and met ex-child soldiers in Burundi (Nguyen in Morales, 2012). This suggests that the experiences represented in *War Witch* may be an amalgamation of the experiences of child soldiers from different conflicts within the Sub-Saharan region.

The four films provide an opportunity to look at both the localised socio-political and economic contexts that may influence the representation of girl soldiers or participants in political conflicts, as well as the global influences. For instance, *Sarafina!*, which celebrates the participation of the youth in the anti-apartheid struggle, and released at a time when South Africa was transitioning from apartheid to democratic rule, was well placed and well timed to be used for socio-political ends such as the promotion of national unity during the turbulent times of the early 1990s. The film reminded South Africans that Sarafina’s dream, the dream for democracy, was finally coming true for all South Africans.⁷ The film mediates the South African experience for both South African and international audiences.

Summary of the Films

Sarafina!

Sarafina! depicts the experiences of South African township youths in the late 1970s and the 1980s by mainly following the experiences of a high school girl, Sarafina (played by Leleti Khumalo). At first, Sarafina is only concerned with becoming a celebrity or a “star,” but she goes through a process of political awakening in the course of her own personal experiences

⁷ Sarafina is the film’s title character.

and also as a result of the history lessons her class receives from their school teacher, Mrs Masambuka (played by Whoopi Goldberg). Sarafina witnesses the death of her friends and schoolmates as they are shot down by the apartheid police during a riot. She stands by helplessly as her teacher is dragged away by the police, knowing that, just like many other political activists before her, she may never return. She is later arrested and tortured, together with other students, for participating in the killing of a black police officer, Sabela, who is burnt to death. This last experience seems to break her spirit. She realises that, just like her role model, Mrs Masambuka, she is not capable of killing. She however eventually figures out how to combine political activism and her desire to be a star. We last see her performing as Mandela in a play set in the future. The play imagines a future in which Mandela has been released from prison and speaks to the multitude of South African people.

Flame

Flame centres on a girl named Florence, and her participation in Zimbabwe's anti-colonial struggle. The story is told from the perspective of her friend, Nyasha. Florence convinces Nyasha that they should join the struggle. But after walking all the way from Zimbabwe to Mozambique, where they join a guerrilla training camp, they realise that war is not as easy as they expected, especially for women. They discover that although the war is about fighting for equality, the patriarchal system within the camp means that men and women are not treated equally. Women rely on the mercy of men for food, and for the opportunity to receive training and participate in combat activities. Women are also sexually abused. Given all these odds stacked against her, Florence, who renames herself Flame, still rises through the ranks by sheer determination and skill to become a detachment commander. However, after the war ends all her gains are reversed as she becomes just another ordinary woman in the village,

struggling to survive and feed her children. She once again has to fight for her place in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

Heart of Fire

Heart of Fire is inspired by Senait Mehari's memoir, *Heart of Fire: From Child Soldier to Soul Singer* (2006). The film is set in Eritrea during the country's war of independence from Ethiopia, and focuses on the young girl Awet's rather turbulent childhood. At the beginning of the film Awet lives in an orphanage in Asmara because her mother abandoned her when she was just a baby. Her father, whom she had believed lost, sends her half-sister, Freweyni, to bring her home from the orphanage so she can live with him and his family. But Awet soon realises she and Freweyini are both not welcome in this family that is plagued by poverty. They become more like family slaves, performing most of the household chores. Their father eventually gives them over to one of Eritrea's liberation armies, the Jebha. The two girls join other children as well as adults at a camp where they are to be trained as soldiers. Awet enthusiastically learns the ideals of the Jebha, but her idealism is soon shattered when she realises that, rather than fighting the Ethiopians, their group mostly fights another Eritrean liberation army, the Shabia. She also realises that the people they are fighting, the people they are made to believe are monsters, do not really look different from them; they bleed, die, and are just as miserable. Awet's conscience makes her question the purpose of the war. Through her determination and enterprise, she finds a way out for herself, her sister and her friend, effectively saving them from sure death, a fate that befalls the rest of their military unit's members.

War Witch

War Witch uses a voice-over narrative in which fourteen-year old Komona, the main character, tells her unborn child the story of how she ended up fighting for a rebel group. When Komona is at the age of twelve, her village is attacked by a rebel group. During this attack, she is handed a gun and forced to kill her parents. The rebel group then kidnaps and forces her to join their war. At first, she is sent to the frontlines to fight just like the rest of the other children within the group, but it is soon discovered that she can sense the presence of the enemy. At this point, she is elevated to the esteemed position of witch and becomes the rebel leader's valuable asset. However, with the help of her newfound friend, Magician, she becomes aware that her special status will not last for long. She and Magician desert the rebel camp. They attempt to live a normal life by acting on their romantic feelings for each other and getting married. Their new-found happiness only lasts for a short while because the rebels eventually find them. Magician is killed and Komona is kidnapped again, this time by an even more brutal leader who sexually abuses and impregnates her. Komona eventually hacks this man to death and escapes. But, with the end of the war nowhere in sight, her future remains uncertain.

Significance of the Study

Films, among other media, are important in shaping the way both Africans and people from other continents understand African political conflicts as well as the roles and experiences of those affected by them. Many people, especially those who have never been to Africa, are still unfamiliar with Africa's complex histories. As a way of understanding the continent, they often rely on representations in the media (Tully, 2010: 56). These representations are however not value free; they reflect the power dynamics within global politics, with Africa on the weaker side. Representations of those with less power or the marginalised have largely

been seen as playing ‘a part in maintaining and justifying the very processes which support existing social inequalities’ (Turner, 2009: 170). During the colonial period, for example, representations of Africans were ‘often replete with stereotypes and racist subtexts,’ to use Beti Ellerson’s (2012: 226) words, which reinforced colonialists’ position of power. This thesis demonstrates how the socio-political position of girls who participate in African political conflicts influences the way they are imagined.

To some viewers, Africa has remained ‘a continent that can only be fully explained through anthropological studies that have undergirded European based research on Africa’ (Ellerson, 2004: 190). To these viewers, the idea that a filmmaker can exercise artistic authority and create an African girl soldier from their own imagination seems unimaginable. Also, filmmakers who make films about African child soldiers or postcolonial wars often link their films to reality.⁸ These films also tend to blur the boundary between fact and fiction through the use of filmic realism. Using filmic realism enables the films to be highly effective as ideological tools. The Africa represented on film then becomes a reflection of material and ideological investments rather than ‘a series of detached fantasies that offer pure entertainment’ (Higgins, 2012: 6). Therefore, these films, through their texts, production processes and reception, reflect ways of thinking, dominant or otherwise, about girl soldiers.

⁸ *Blood Diamond* (Edward Zwick, 2006) was used in the United States in a campaign ‘to change the image of diamonds by linking them explicitly to blood and depriving them by the same stroke of their innocence’ (Leander, 2008: 4).

Laura Edmondson (2005: 464) states that in a discussion of *War Child: Abducted* (Robert E. Altman, 2004), one of the Ugandans who actively contributed to the film’s script, Sam Okello Kelo, responded to a question about the “truth” of the film by saying “This is not fiction. This is fact,” and thus conflating realism with reality.

War Witch is based on extensive research on African child soldiers (Morales, 2012).

Heart of Fire is inspired by the memoir of a former child soldier.

Although films are limited by their length, they have the potential to explore in depth, and visualise the complexities of the experiences of girls in political conflicts. Instead of utilizing this potential, more often than not, films end up delivering the same familiar images that are devoid of context. This has resulted in what Diane Negra calls the ‘echo-chamber of repetition and reinforcement’ (Negra in Handyside & Taylor-Jones, 2016: 6). The films use what Garuba and Himmelman, borrowing from Edward Said, refer to as ‘a referencing system of citations,’ that is, the films build ‘on a previous, always already known image...’ (2012: 16). However, as MaryEllen Higgins argues, ‘the question of whether [these films] are ultimately viewed as repetitions, reinforcements, or subversions of the colonial archive is not, in the end, determined by the films themselves, but by how we interpret them’ (2012: 10). The “already known image” is also not constant; it evolves with time.

This thesis shall demonstrate that the evolution of the image of the girl soldier is linked to global influences which have seen African communities lose more and more power to influence how they are imagined within the global context. The African girl soldier is largely no longer viewed from an African perspective.

The Girl Soldier and Globalisation

Through examining the shifts in the representations of the African girl soldier, the contradictions of the process of globalisation become pronounced. Globalisation can be defined as the intensification of global political, economic, military and cultural interconnectedness (Kaldor, 2006: 4). The process involves ‘both integration and fragmentation, homogenisation and diversification, globalisation and localisation’ (Kaldor, 2006: 4). Although Africa is becoming increasingly visible in world activities, it is also

separated from the rest of the world and marked by difference as evident in the stereotypical representations of disease, poverty, human rights abuses and war. More recent films about African child soldiers are often ‘aimed at a specific globalised, Westernised audience that is seeking to have its own world position ratified and consolidated via this viewing experience’ (Taylor-Jones, 2016: 180). In this regard, film becomes a significant tool in global politics (Taylor-Jones, 2016: 189).

The Girl Soldier and Representations of Her Pain and Suffering

Susan Sontag cautions that ‘no “we” should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain’ (2004: 6). Films about African postcolonial wars often place more focus on those who suffer the barbaric and irrational abuses perpetrated by the rebel commanders and their armies. The girl soldier becomes a representation of extreme suffering as girls are stereotypically considered to be weaker than boys. The pain of the girl soldier is thus used to emphasise the severity of the war situation and the extent of the “burden” of those external to the affected communities, the “privileged centre” without whom, it appears, stability cannot be achieved. This thesis, therefore, explores issues of perspective. Within this context, ‘Frantz Fanon’s examination of the white gaze upon the black person as an object to be looked at (1952) parallels Mulvey’s analysis of the male gaze and the ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ of the (white) female screen image’ (Ellerson, 2012: 226). When considering the complex position of African women within the context of colonial histories, Beti Ellerson emphasises the importance of employing ‘intersectionality as a conceptual framework’ because it ‘allows the convergence of gendered, racialized and postcolonial identities’ (ibid.). This framework is similarly applicable to considerations of the representations of African girls.

The thesis also considers whether the films under study demonstrate what Hannah Arendt referred to as ‘the banality of evil’ (1994).⁹ The idea of ‘the banality of evil’ is inherent in phrases like “T.I.A: This is Africa.”¹⁰ Brinkman argues that ‘situating certain practices outside history marks them as unacceptable’ (2000: 20). But T.I.A and its negative connotations imply that the deplorable conditions in some parts of Africa are not outside history; they are a significant part of what defines the continent.¹¹ In that sense, the rebel commander’s existence becomes a given: it is Africa, and therefore he exists. And, as a result, the suffering of the girl becomes perpetual instead of a short-term experience.

The Girl Soldier and Neo-colonial Perspectives

While the girl soldier of the anti-colonial struggle is marked by political consciousness, the girl soldier of the more recent African postcolonial wars has regressed back to being marked by the savagery she is born into. Where the girl soldier of the anti-colonial struggle goes through a process of political awakening, the girl soldier of the recent postcolonial wars goes through a process of ideological indoctrination. The *Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary* defines the word indoctrinate as ‘to teach (someone) to fully accept the ideas, opinions, and beliefs of a particular group and to not consider other ideas, opinions, and beliefs’ (2015). While the word indoctrination is not always negative (*Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary*, 2015), in this case, it is used in the sense of its negative connotations that links it to brainwashing.

⁹ The phrase describes a situation where violence and suffering is so commonplace that it becomes difficult to identify its roots and put a stop to it.

¹⁰ This phrase was popularised by Edward Zwick’s film *Blood Diamond* (2006).

¹¹ In reference to the postcolonial war in Angola, Brinkman notes that many of those who have suffered the violence often considered it outside of their history and therefore unacceptable (2000: 11).

In representations of postcolonial wars, rebel commanders and other officers are often portrayed as responsible for “brainwashing” and abusing children.¹² The abuse usually includes sexual abuse, putting the children on dangerous and mind-altering drugs, and using them to commit heinous crimes. While sexual abuse also applies to boys, girls are often represented as more vulnerable to this form of abuse.¹³ Taylor-Jones notes that ‘women and girls are often focused upon as symbolic bearers of ideas of nationhood and or ethnic identity [..., and] rape and enforced breeding are seen as emblematic acts against a wider social, national, or cultural group’ (2016: 183). Françoise Pfaff cautions against the use of ‘women characters as metaphors’ by saying that ‘transferring some of their qualities to something other than themselves’ may ‘simplify and thus dehumanise the primary characters,’ and may ‘reduce or disassociate the object from the symbol for which it stands’ (1982). Pfaff however concedes that women characters can still be portrayed ‘as both human beings and symbols without ... erasing their humanity’ (ibid.).

The sexual abuse of African girls makes for an even more compelling case for the necessity of Euro-American intervention. Euro-Americans become the representation of ‘rationality, stability, strength, intelligence, and dignity in the face of the ruthlessness, violence, chaos, irrationality, ignorance, and ineptitude of the darker being’ (Sterling, 2010: 196). This humanist approach or perspective is often associated with what Cheryl Sterling calls ‘the

¹² This can be contrasted to the anti-colonial wars, in which the African males were seen as leading the struggle against oppression.

¹³ In addition to the dominant idea that girls are weaker than boys, this reflects the dominance of heteronormative ideas.

centre “white,”” (2010: 195).¹⁴ ¹⁵ Within this “centre,” being a human adult satisfies one of the two conditions laid out by Arendt (2003: 149-150) for collective responsibility. She argues that a person can be held responsible for something they have not done if they belong to a group that they are unable to dissolve by any voluntary act of theirs.¹⁶ However, taking responsibility for something they have not done demonstrates the centre’s moral strength in contrast to the “darker other.” This thesis considers the humanist project and explores its influences on the representations of female minors who participate in African political conflicts.

Taking all the above-mentioned factors into consideration, this thesis will look at how the four films under study reflect the forces that influence the contents of knowledge archives, and hence, people’s imaginations. This is important because, as Leander argues, ‘if images ... are to enrich rather than impoverish our political conceptions and repertoires for action, we have to be more critically aware of how visual images construct our social and political world’ (2008: 19). The thesis will also explore how these films modify the known images, that is, how they use what Garuba and Himmelman (2012: 17) refer to as ‘uncited’ images. Uncited images are those images that might make people stop and think because they fall ‘outside the archive of representations’ (Garuba & Himmelman, 2012: 17). MaryEllen Higgins suggests that some of the new “Africa films” reveal ‘a mixing of human rights

¹⁴ Generally, a humanist can be defined as someone who ‘makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals’ (British Humanist Association, 2017).

¹⁵ The centre “white,”” is defined in contrast to the ‘darker “other”’ (Sterling, 2010: 195).

¹⁶ Arendt describes collective responsibility as ‘the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men’ (2003: 158). The second condition is that people can be held responsible for the sins of their fathers (2003: 150). Arendt emphasises that collective responsibility is political (2003: 149).

concerns with familiar figures from what V.Y Mudimbe describes as the “colonial library,” figures that have been revived and cleverly revised in a new century’ (2012: 2). The purpose of exploring the uncited images is to look at whether the uncited instances are revolutionary or simply new ways of refining the ideological implications of the cited images.

In addition to the ‘cited’ and ‘uncited’ images, the thesis also uses many other concepts in its exploration of the representations of girls who participate in African political conflicts. These are explored in the following section.

Concepts

Represent

The term ‘represent’ is used to refer to the use of language, signs and images ‘to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people’ (Hall, 1997: 15). Because films represent, they can be seen as a form of communication (Turner, 2009: 66). Filmmakers do not just show; they construct meaning through the images and sounds depicted on the screen. Films, therefore, contribute to giving meaning to identities and communities through communication, that is, through the transmission of ideas. This form of communication, as Graeme Turner notes, happens within specific cultural contexts (2009: 66). Turner defines culture as ‘a dynamic process which produces the behaviours, the practices, the institutions, and the meanings which constitute our social existence’ (2009: 66). Turner adds that ‘the language system of a culture carries that culture’s system of priorities, its specific set of values, its specific composition of the physical and social world’ (2009: 67). This link between culture and representations complicates the position of girl soldiers because they are largely not in a position to “present” themselves and so have to rely on others to represent them and give meaning to their experiences. How their experiences are

constructed, to an extent, depends on how others understand those experiences. That is, their representations depend on meaning-making processes external to their own. For this reason, this thesis considers cultural influences on the representations of girl soldiers.

Political Conflict and War

The term “conflict” is used in the title of this thesis because it is deemed a more appropriate umbrella term that encompasses the many forms that large-scale expressions of political discontent have taken over the years. In a succinct summary of Charles Lewis Taylor and David A. Jodice’s conceptualisation of political conflicts (1983), Juha Auvinen defines political conflict as ‘intra-group conflict behaviour with an expressed political target, or conflict behaviour between groups and the political regime’ (1997: 184). Auvinen (1997: 184) goes on to explore the various indicators of political conflict:

- Political protest, which consists of demonstrations, riots and political strikes.
- Rebellion, which consists of armed attacks and political assassinations.
- Irregular executive transfers, which are successful or unsuccessful attempts to remove and replace the incumbent national executive outside the conventional legal or customary procedures for transferring formal power.

A conflict can therefore take violent or non-violent forms of confrontation, with war, or armed conflict, being an extreme case of violent confrontation. The absence of armed clashes in *Sarafina!* makes what we see less of a war, but still a serious political conflict. Armed clashes are however hinted at as happening off-screen through references to people who have left to fight the war. Sarafina is therefore not regarded as a child soldier within the context of this thesis, but a female minor or girl participating in a political conflict. In *Flame, Heart of*

Fire and War Witch, we are however presented with wars. Therefore, Florence (also known as Flame) in *Flame*, Awet in *Heart of Fire* and Komona in *War Witch* are regarded as child soldiers. The concept of child soldier is however complicated, as explained below.

Child Soldier

A child soldier can be defined as ‘a child who participates actively in a violent conflict as a member of an organisation that applies violence in a systematic way’ (Gates, 2011: 31). But a child soldier does not need to brandish a gun; he/she may ‘serve as a spy, scout, cook, messenger, porter or even a sex slave’ (Gates, 2011: 31). Catarina Martins suggests that interlinking the terms “child” and “soldier” creates a political agenda ‘that underlines vulnerability and the need for protection with another that connotes extreme violence’ (2011: 435). Echoing a similar sentiment, Harrow states that ‘to be a child-soldier is to remain little, a small child, while still exercising the violence of the commander’ (2013: 2). Because of this politicised nature of the term, it is not surprising that child soldiers are often associated with postcolonial wars rather than anti-colonial wars.

Defining a child soldier is complicated by the fact that there is no universal definition of what a child is (Gates, 2011; Podder, 2011; Singer & Dovey, 2012). Borrowing from Alcinda Honwana, this thesis ‘emphasizes the diverse ways in which the concept of childhood is socially and culturally constructed in specific contexts’ (2006: 28). Children’s immaturity is taken as an irrefutable biological fact, but ‘conceptualisation of this immaturity along with the meanings attached to it is essentially [considered] a fact of culture’ (Podder, 2011b: 143). In some African cultures, for example, girls do not go through ‘the Western cultural notion and rite of passage of being a teenager,’ and, in some of those cases, ‘pubescent girls are considered to be women after initiation rites’ (McKay, 2005: 387). In this thesis, particular

attention is paid to the signifiers of “childhood” deployed in the films under study. These include, among other things, a clear dependency of the characters on adults, use of school uniforms, and the explicit mentioning of the character’s age. Cultural considerations allow for the idea of childhood to be explored within the context of a constellation of factors. For instance, marriage would not necessarily denote a clear move to adulthood if it is a forced marriage. Therefore, each of the signifiers of childhood in the films under study is not looked at in isolation, but in relation to other factors.

Although there are diverse ways of defining childhood, many films focusing on children seem to draw largely from the more universalised understanding. This understanding sees children ‘as dependent and vulnerable human beings who are entitled to life, sustenance, health, and well-being’ (Honwana, 2006: 31). In *Heart of Fire*, there can be no doubt of Awet’s status as a child due to her physical appearance which marks her distinctly, but we also see her performing ‘childhood.’ For instance, we see Awet in a classroom with other children her age, and we also see her interact with adults in visuals that mark her small body as different from the larger bodies of adults.

War Witch explicitly emphasises Komona’s age, which indicates that it taps into the idea of childhood as defined by international organisations and conventions. For instance, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child defines a child as ‘a person below the age of 18, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger’ (United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), n.d). The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) of 1990 also defines a child simply as ‘every human being below the age of 18 years’ (The African Union Commission, n.d). By explicitly stating Komona’s age, *War Witch* also ensures that viewers are aware that she is younger than fifteen years of age.

Under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the use of children under the age of fifteen years ‘to participate actively in hostilities’ is considered a serious violation ‘within the established framework of international law’ (International Criminal Court, 1998). *War Witch*, therefore, privileges age over the idea of childhood as a social construction, but it also gives Komona characteristics that complicate the universal definition of childhood as shall be discussed in Chapter Six.

Florence in *Flame* and Sarafina in *Sarafina!* fall on the borderline. They could as easily be seen as young adults instead of children. However, there are indicators that put them in the category of children. These two films appear to adopt the definition of childhood used in many African cultures, which ‘has little to do with age’ and more to do with ‘social roles, expectations, and responsibilities’ (Honwana, 2006: 52). Florence and Sarafina are identified as children because they depend on adults for food and shelter, they live under adult supervision, and they have not yet completed school. They are however characterised as having, to an extent, independent minds. The two are reminiscent of nineteenth and twentieth-century literature which is ‘filled with heroic child fighters, such as Gavroche in Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* or the boy spy Kim in Kipling’s eponymous novel’ (Rosen & Rosen, 2012: 306). In these cases, ‘the child fighter represented “the people” in their struggle for democracy [...and] served as a collective representation of all that was good, striking to break out of an encrusted social order’ (Rosen & Rosen, 2012: 306). In film, we have heroic child soldier figures in films such as Soviet cinema’s *Ivan’s Childhood* (Andrei Tarkovsky & Eduard Abalov, 1962) and *Come and See* (Elem Klimov, 1985). But these two films do not celebrate war. Ivan in *Ivan’s Childhood* and Florya Gaishun in *Come and See* are heroic but also tragic. James Chapman would classify these two films under the tragedy war film, a

lineage characterised by anti-war films that document ‘in stark, uncompromising detail the horrors and atrocities of [war]’ (2008: 12).¹⁷

The image of the child soldier as hero – even if tragic – has however been reversed in more recent years, especially for children from the Global South, where ‘intervention in the name of children in the South gives the neo-colonial civilizing mission and neo-colonial occupation the contours of an unquestionable moral mission of redemption’ (Martins, 2011: 436). Colonial themes are then played out through ‘the imagery and discourses on child soldiers’ (Denov, 2010: 14). This is done through the reproduction of ‘enduring hierarchies between the global North and South, cementing notions of race, perversity and barbarism, alongside the dehumanisation of child soldiers and their societies’ (ibid.).

For children from the Euro-American world we still have, for example, Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012) who is represented as a “heroic child warrior.” The film’s fantasy and the developed world setting keeps ‘Africa, with its images of abused and exploited children, at a safe mental and moral distance’ (Rosen & Rosen, 2012: 312). Sara Maya Rosen and David M. Rosen also give the *Harry Potter* series (Warner Bros., 2001-2011) as an example of films about children from the Euro-American world that ‘provide powerful, transgressive narratives that fly directly in the face of the dominant social narrative of the helpless, vulnerable victim-child’ (2012: 306). The African child soldier is therefore largely characterised as different, in negative terms, from the Euro-American child.

¹⁷ Chapman explores three lineages of war films. The other two are “Spectacle” and “Adventure.” The “spectacle” lineage is characterised by ‘tension between the desire to capture “real” or “authentic” images of war and the tendency to aestheticize war through aspects of film form and style’ (2008: 12). Adventure films represent war ‘as an adventure narrative and a site of heroic actions’ (ibid.). Adventure films belong ‘to what has been called “the pleasure culture of war”’ (ibid.).

Additionally, child soldiers in African political conflicts have become more tragic than heroic (if at all) because of the representations of their relationship with African adults. Singer and Dovey note that adults are often represented as ‘alternately brutal, devoid of agency, or quite simply absent’ (2012: 153). This inability of adult Africans to take responsibility for the welfare of children ‘contributes to the broader, long-standing racist characterisation of Africa and Africans as inherently childlike and incapable of self-determination’ (ibid.). Such representations therefore contribute to the grimness of the nature of the children’s conditions of existence.

In many ways, African children participating in the postcolonial political conflicts are represented as the “Other.” The term “other” is used here to refer to ‘people who are separate from one’s self, whether in terms of “race”, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, time or space’ (Beattie, 2004: 45). Representations of African child soldiers in postcolonial wars demonstrate that the idea of difference, or the “other,” is constructed within specific power relations. Dominant Euro-American cultures often place themselves at the centre, as the benchmark for development, so that the behaviour of those outside of that culture, such as Africans, becomes primitive and unacceptable. Othered children ‘strain against adult constructions [and] become marginalised, outside the idealised notions of what children should be’ (Olson & Scahill, 2012: x). African child soldiers are often ‘portrayed with qualities which children ought not to have and as products of societies with qualities that societies ought not to have’ (Utas, 2011: 213).

The Child Soldier and Gendered Experiences

Catarina Martins points out that in the term “child soldier,” the word “child” is a ‘sexless neutral’ (2011: 434). That is, it ignores the differences between boys and girls that result from

the differences in their reproductive organs and functions. The term also ignores that, even for children, war experiences are gendered. For example, because of their sex and gender, girls have an added risk of becoming pregnant as a result of rape or forced marriages. Also, the patriarchal nature of many wars means that girls are often confined to non-leadership roles.

The term child soldier has often been used to refer to boys because the male gender has traditionally been recognised as the principal participant in wars, with females relegated to supportive roles. The gender of girl soldiers puts them at a greater disadvantage regarding the way they are treated in wars, the way their war efforts are acknowledged, as well as the way they are represented on film. Taylor-Jones states that ‘as symbols of a national identity rather than citizens of the nation, the girl soldier presents a series of complex and negative connotations’ (2016: 183). Representations of girl soldiers therefore come with additional connotations to those associated with the boy soldier. It is the aim of this thesis to explore the gendered experience of female minors in African conflicts as represented in films.

Anti-colonial and Postcolonial Conflicts

Traditionally, wars are viewed as waged ‘for a definable political end, i.e. state interest’ (Kaldor, 2006: 17). For instance, Inge Brinkman points out that the postcolonial war in Angola has been seen by some Angolans as “absurd,” unlike the anti-colonial war against the Portuguese in which the ‘many horrible and meaningless things’ that happened could be justified because the colonial power had to be ousted (2000: 2). But postcolonial wars have clearly proven that people within the same state do not always agree on the definition of “state interest.” A good grasp on the nature of African wars helps to understand the representations of African child soldiers.

Many scholars have attempted to explain the changing face of war. Mary Kaldor distinguishes between what she calls “old wars” and “new wars” by explaining that ‘new wars involve a blurring of the distinctions between war¹⁸..., organised crime¹⁹... and large-scale violation of human rights’²⁰ (2006: 2). This description brings in the issue of legitimacy and moral judgement, issues that have always been complicated by power relations and competing interests (political or otherwise). For instance, during the colonial period, colonial authorities sometimes referred to anti-colonial wars waged by the colonised people as ‘uprisings, insurgencies or ... low intensity conflicts,’ instead of war (Kaldor, 2006: 17). Some researchers have noted that during the colonial period in Kenya, ‘the British government and press ... ignored the Mau Mau’s political and nationalist initiatives, to delegitimize the movement and to create an image of the Mau Mau as savage and primitive’ (Tully, 2010: 56-57). Similarly, Hjalte Tin (2001: 146) notes that on the morning after the June 16th 1976 Soweto Uprising in South Africa, some white newspapers sought to delegitimize the protest with headlines such as ‘Bands of marauding blacks rampaged through Soweto last night,’ in the *Rand Daily Mail*, and ‘Drunken Tsotsis on prowl,’ in *The Star*. But in post-apartheid South Africa, June 16th was declared a national holiday in commemoration of the uprising. The idea of legitimacy is therefore often highly contested, with some groups only managing to legitimise their war after their victory.

¹⁸ Defined as ‘violence between states or organised political groups for political motives’ (Kaldor, 2006: 2).

¹⁹ Defined as ‘violence undertaken by privately organised groups for private purposes, usually financial gain’ (ibid.).

²⁰ Defined as ‘violence undertaken by states or politically organised groups against individuals’ (ibid.).

In another observation, Laura Edmondson states that many forms of physical and emotional abuse have always been used in wars, but ‘traditional manifestations of state terror are typically concealed from the public eye,’ whereas ‘practitioners of new wars openly perform their acts of violence’ (2005: 454). In most distinctions between old and new wars, judgment is placed on what the public can see, and hidden atrocities in old wars are ignored. Also, even the so-called new wars have evolved over time. William DeMars states that ‘the predominant strategies of internal conflict have shifted from military coup in the 1960s, to protracted war in the 1970s and 1980s, to warlordism in the 1990s’ (2000: 2).

Instead of the term “old wars” and “new wars,” this thesis uses the terms anti-colonial and postcolonial wars. Borrowing from Maria Eriksson Baaz, the term postcolonial is not used here to suggest ‘an achieved state *beyond* colonialism’ because ‘colonial history still shapes contemporary identities’ through ‘past ideas and images [that] remain embedded in contemporary discourses and identities’ (2001: 6). Rather, the term postcolonial is used to refer ‘to the period coming after the demise of the European colonial empires’ (ibid.). This choice is made in an attempt to move away from issues of legitimacy and moral judgment that characterises definitions of “old and new wars.”

The author agrees with Redie Bereketeab who argues that ‘names and definitions transcend the descriptive when they serve a practical political purpose’ (2016: 16). Bereketeab also argues that there is a ‘link between the names given to conflicts or movements and finding solutions to them’ (2016: 12). According to Bereketeab, analyzing and dealing with problems involves three steps: 1) social categorization; 2) value judgment or evaluation; 3) depending on the judgment, taking measures towards resolution or non-resolution (ibid.). For a positive value judgment, positive measures will be taken to find solutions, whereas for a negative

value judgment, ‘the measures will be negative or entirely absent’ (ibid.). For this reason, the term “civil war,” which, in simple terms, refers to a war between or among citizens of the same country (*English Oxford Living Dictionary*, 2017), is also not preferred. As Bereketeab notes, civil wars are ‘widely and negatively perceived as state breaking ... rather than as the constructive enforcement of people’s rights’ (2016: 14).

The author acknowledges that postcolonial wars ‘are the product of a deep history,’ and that ‘the principal actors are far from just savages,’ but thinking humans ‘whose actions, however abhorrent, are underpinned by political rationales and motives’ (Stearns, 2011: 4). In fact, the thesis explores how moral judgments about anti-colonial and postcolonial wars have influenced the way African girl soldiers are viewed.

The “Ideal Victim” and the “Complex Political Victim”

Images of the political victim are powerful, gripping and integral in helping us make sense of conflict, particularly in making moral calculations, determining who is “good” and who is “evil.”

Erica Bouris, 2007: 4

Images of African child soldiers have certainly influenced how people make sense of the postcolonial African wars. Many of these images fall under the humanitarian discourse which ‘hinges on the assumption that images of suffering can invoke compassion in viewers, and that this compassion can become a catalyst for positive change’ (Bleiker & Kay, 2007: 139). Chris Coulter argues that humanitarian agencies and quantitative conflict analyses have appropriated the concept of “victim” in such a way that makes ““victim” synonymous with “lack of agency”” (2008: 68). Coulter goes further to say that this has the effect of concealing

‘other roles these victims might have played and how they have been interpreted by their local communities’ (ibid.). Disturbing images of children who have lost limbs, children with big guns that emphasise their small frame, or children high on drugs are very common.²¹ These images emphasise the vulnerability of children, creating the image of the child as the ideal victim. Erica Bouris defines the ideal victim as ‘one who is attended by a certain constellation of characteristics that include innocence, purity, lack of responsibility, and moral superiority’ (2007: 9).

- **Innocence:** Children are often represented as civilians who are victimised or forced to become combatants by rebel groups. They are also often innocent of wrong doing, that is, they do not do anything to deserve their victimisation.
- **Purity:** Children are often represented as wholly good and beyond reproach, that is, before they are forced to become soldiers.²²
- **Moral Superiority:** Bouris states that ‘the extreme suffering of the victim is thought to lead to accelerated moral development’ (2007: 42). In relation to child soldiers, this idea is often complicated by the fact that child soldiers can also cause the suffering of others, even other children. But moral judgment is often directed at the adults who force them to perform these acts. Also, those children who manage to escape or display a certain level of conscience often become morally superior.

²¹ Such images can be seen in documentaries such as *Chain of Tears* (Toni Strasburg, 1988) and *Children’s War: Life in Northern Uganda* (Andrew Krakower, 2009).

²² In Edward Zwick’s *Blood Diamond* (2006), before Dia Vandy is kidnapped by rebels, his main role is to follow his father’s instructions and advice. The first time we see him his father is waking him up so that he can go to school.

- **Lack of Responsibility:** Children are often viewed as too young to be held ‘responsible for their actions or situations’ (Bouris, 2007: 45). They cannot be blamed for being dragged into war.

Drugs also play a significant role in portraying child soldiers as ‘ideal victims.’ In an article featured on Aljazeera.com on 25 November 2016, Barbara McCarthy states that ‘recent publications have revealed that narcotics are as much a part of conflict as bullets; often defining wars rather than sitting anecdotally on the sidelines of them.’ McCarthy cites several sources:

- The book *Blitzed* (2017) by German author Norman Ohler, which ‘describes how the Third Reich was permeated with drugs, including cocaine, heroin and most notably crystal meth...’ (McCarthy, 2016).²³
- The Laurier Military History Archives in Ontario, Canada, which point to the idea that even the Allies consumed drugs in World War II (ibid.).
- The book *Shooting Up: A Short History of Drugs and War* (2016) by Lukasz Kamienski, which ‘describes how the US military plied its servicemen with speed, steroids, and painkillers...during the Vietnam War’ (ibid.).

Such wide use of drugs has not drawn as much attention in filmic representations of the so-called “old wars.” When the German U-boat movie *Das Boot* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1981) came out, many war veterans were outraged because it had scenes with extremely drunk U-boat captains (Dr Peter Steinkamp in McCarthy, 2016). However, drugs seem to have been a defining feature in African postcolonial wars, especially as far as child soldiers are

²³ *Blitzed*’s was originally published in 2015 in the German language as *Der totale Rausch: Drogen im Dritten Reich* (The total Rush: Drugs in the Third Reich).

concerned. Not only does this diminish the moral justification of these wars; it also emphasises the abuse and brainwashing visited upon the children by the adults who lead the wars. To some extent, taking away the child soldiers' minds through drugs seem to preserve their purity and lack of responsibility because some of their most horrendous actions can then be blamed on the drugs and the adults who pushed the drugs on them. The child soldier becomes 'the one who was made to do it' (Harrow, 2013: 2).

This thesis will demonstrate that although *War Witch* and *Heart of Fire* present the ideal victim common in representations of African postcolonial conflicts, *Sarafina!* and *Flame* present us with what Erica Bouris (2007) calls the 'Complex Political Victim.' The complex political victim can be defined as 'a victim who is no longer chained to characteristics of complete innocence and purity, but remains a victim nonetheless ... a victim who may bear some discursive responsibility for her or his victimisation, a victim who may have a contradictory set of "interests" and as such would have difficulty fitting into the traditional script of the ideal victim' (Bouris, 2007: 10). The main common feature between Sarafina in *Sarafina!* and Florence in *Flame* is that they "choose" to join the struggle, unlike Awet in *Heart of Fire* and Komona in *War Witch* who are both forced to join the war.²⁴

Conveying the Human: Realism and its Alternatives

In many fictional films about child soldiers, filmmakers often reflect a desire to situate their fictional narratives within recognisable historical experiences. For instance, Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire's *Johnny Mad Dog* (2008) is not set in a specific country, but it 'ends with images of real child soldiers taken during the war in Liberia between 1990 and 2003' (Sélavy

²⁴ The idea of choice is complex. Rachel Brett and Irma Specht suggest that some environments and experiences reduce the 'effective degree of free choice in many cases' (2004: 5).

interviewing Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire, 2009). In explaining his choice, Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire states that he did not wish to ‘anchor the story ... in a war that is over and that no one cares about anymore ... it was about saying it happened, but also that this is still happening’ (in an interview with Virginie Sélavy, 2009).

Sauvaire clearly takes a humanitarian angle, which means that his representations are meant to impact the way viewers perceive the realities of child soldiers. His film’s form of representation therefore matters because it plays a significant role in the way the film is interpreted, and in the way African child soldiers’ experiences are understood. For Sauvaire, setting the story “somewhere in Africa” and shooting it in Liberia²⁵ is his way of situating the story both in the past and in the present, making the issue of child soldiers a continuous reality. But this also results in the blurring of fact and fiction.

On the other hand, representations of child soldiers in anti-colonial wars are not necessarily burdened with the same socio-political function as representations of child soldiers in postcolonial wars. This is because anti-colonial wars can only exist in the past. But films such as *Sarafina!* and *Flame* demonstrate that representations of children in anti-colonial struggles are not only relevant as documents of history; they also link the past to the present. They serve to remind people what they fought for, and therefore work as a measure for evaluating present successes and failures. Films about anti-colonial struggles encourage processes of self-recognition for African people, if not on an individual level, then on the level of an imagined community.²⁶ This process of self-recognition involves an interaction between

²⁵ Liberia experienced postcolonial wars from 1989-1997 and 1999-2003.

²⁶ Imagined community as defined by Benedict Anderson. He argues that nations are imagined because ‘the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members,

personal or group experience and the representations depicted in the films (Benwell et al., 2012: 47).²⁷ Benwell et al. argue that ‘self-recognition is not only an act in and of itself, but also a form of social action and identity work in interaction’ (2012: 47). *Sarafina!* and *Flame* are not biographical films, but as shall be discussed in Chapters Three and Four, their narratives provide enough clues to suggest that the films are inspired by historic events.

Some film techniques have been used to link these films to reality. An example is the use of realism. The *Merriam-Webster dictionary* (2016) defines realism as ‘the theory or practice of fidelity in art and literature to nature or to real life and to accurate representation without idealization.’ Words such as “authenticity” and “truthfulness” have also been used in relation to realism. When referring to Italian neo-realist films, André Bazin uses phrases such as ‘re-constituted reportage,’ ‘exceptionally documentary quality’ and ‘portrayal of actuality,’ thus emphasising the link to “reality” (1971: 20). But Bazin goes on to say realism does not necessarily depict reality, rather, it creates ‘the illusion of reality’ (1971: 26). He defines “realist” as ‘all narrative means tending to bring an added measure of reality to the screen’ (1971: 27).²⁸ In a discussion of *Blood Diamond* (Zwick, 2006), Anna Leander argues that the film ‘is marked by the extreme care to ensure that the film appears real, possibly more real than the reality it recounts’ (2008: 8). Such added measure of reality is often intended to enable the films to achieve great social impact. The images become a support of what Catarina Martins calls ‘emotionally and ethically unbeatable arguments’ (2011: 439-440).

meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (Anderson, 1991: 6).

²⁷ Benwell et al.’s discussion focuses on written texts, but the concept can also be applied to film.

²⁸ This ‘added measure of reality’ is often achieved through the use of nonprofessional actors, hand-held camera and location shooting.

Viewers are also implicated in the creation of the ‘illusion of reality’ because, for the film to work as a “realist,” the audience also have to feel the ‘extraordinary feeling of truth’ (Bazin, 1971: 24). The result is that ‘the medium of realism [is sometimes] conflated with reality’ (Edmondson, 2005: 465).

Realism has become ‘a deep-seated cultural investment’ (2005: 467). This is especially so in the representations of African child soldiers in which realism is privileged ‘as a seemingly objective medium of representation’ (Edmondson, 2005: 465). The use of realism can indeed be seen ‘as a capitulation to a global marketplace that uses the mirage of objectivity to convey the horror of ... war’ (Edmondson, 2005: 463). While realism serves a purpose,²⁹ it is also necessary to explore other forms of representation as a means of providing a plurality of perceptions. Laura Edmondson writes that ‘anthropologists and theatre scholars alike typically disparage realism as a medium for the representation of violence because it integrates the violence into a seamless status quo resistant to social change and intervention’ (2005: 461).³⁰ If this is the case, then realism could work against encouraging social change.

Filmmakers have been exploring other ways of representing child soldiers, sometimes employing some forms of hybridised styles. For instance, when discussing *Johnny Mad Dog*,

²⁹ Realist films can make people feel ‘an urge to change the order of things ... at least those who can be persuaded, whom only blindness, prejudice, or ill-fortune had led them to harm their fellow [humans]’ (Bazin, 1971: 21).

³⁰ The following are the examples that Edmondson (2005: 461) gives of anthropologists who ‘have engaged in insightful theoretical discussions of antirealisms as useful alternatives’: Michael Taussig who ‘invokes Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt as a method for “transmitting and transforming the hallucinatory reality of Putumayo terror”’; Carolyn Nordstrom who ‘is intrigued by the possibilities of Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque as a means of resisting terror-warfare’; and Allen Feldman who ‘discusses dada and surrealism as means of critiquing “the fetishised integration of realist aesthetics into warfare and the structure of everyday life.”’

Sauvaire says that he ‘decided to use a more dream-like approach to tell the story, rather than a completely realistic one’ (in an interview with Virginie Sélavy, 2009). However, because of the possible social impact of these films, the filmmakers seem to be constrained by “reality” in terms of how far they can indulge in imagination. When discussing *War Witch*, Kim Nguyen, the director of the film, says, ‘at first as a storyteller there’s something to be told, then you realise to the contrary that film has a great place to tell stories about child soldiers. You feel a responsibility towards that reality...’ (in an interview with Morales, 2012). But Judith Butler states that ‘for representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure’ (Butler in Harrow, 2013: 5). Some filmmakers recognise the impossibility of visualising accurately what it is like to be a child soldier, and, as a result, take the reflexive approach that Butler suggests and use techniques that draw attention to their films’ own construction. An example of films whose filmmakers take this approach is *War Witch*.³¹

Contributions by theorists and academics such as Bazin and Edmondson suggest that it is important to look at how narratives are transformed into images in filmic representations. Shocking images of African child soldiers have become more of a cliché in the representations of African postcolonial wars. Sontag states that ‘the image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence’ (2004: 20). This thesis considers the various forms of representation used in the case study films and how they reflect, influence or are influenced by the dominant ideologies and discourses.

³¹ This will be discussed in Chapter Six.

Official History Versus Popular Memory

In the opening sequence of the film *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995), the narrator states that 'history is written by those who have hanged heroes.' While history may not necessary be written by those who hung heroes, the statement implies that history is often characterised by inclusions and exclusions that reflect the perspectives of those in power. The film indicates that its intention is to draw from the popular memory of those in subordinate positions in order to offer a perspective that is different from "official history." Teshome H. Gabriel states that official history privileges 'the written word of the text' and 'claims a "centre" which continuously marginalizes others' (1989: 53). On the other hand, popular memory involves ordinary people constructing their own histories so that 'there are no longer any "centres" or "margins,"' since the grassroots nature and diversity of sources ensures more inclusivity (Gabriel, 1989: 54). However, given the complexities involved in the construction of histories, it would be very limiting to conceptualise popular memory as necessarily opposed to official history (Maingard, 1994: 243).³² Also, popular memory can exclude significant portions of history as events are 'socially memorised,' that is, 'after the fact, stylised or narratively constituted symbolically,' to an extent that the narratives become standardised (Liisa H. Malkki in Brinkman, 2000: 3). In other cases, especially in postcolonial states, popular memory is sometimes co-opted in order to serve the new ruling classes.

However, the varying experiences that popular memory brings about have the potential to contribute to alternative histories through their additions to collective memory. Collective memory 'refers to recollections which are instantiated beyond the individual by and for the collective' (Zelizer, 1995: 214). When looking at the representations of girl soldiers, it is

³² When discussing *Mapantsula* (Oliver Schmitz, 1988) and *Sarafina!* (Darrell Roodt, 1992), Jacqueline Maingard suggests that 'Gabriel's conceptualization of Third Cinema as guardian of popular memory in opposition to official history becomes a limited one in the face of the mammoth complexity of political transformation in South Africa' (1994: 243).

rather difficult to separate official history from popular memory. There is often a tension between the desire to provide a voice for the girl soldiers and the need to meet the interests of those who fund the films.

Films about child soldiers or children involved in political conflicts often fall under the rubric of “human rights films.” Joyce B. Ashuntantang defines human rights films as ‘films that expose egregious abuses inflicted on ordinary people who do not receive support from local systems of justice and who do not have the means to articulate their stories to wide audiences’ (2012: 54). The films can also be seen as what Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg calls the ‘counter-historical dramatic film,’ which refers to ‘a historic event or true story, presenting a counter-narrative to an official version of history or to a perceived silence surrounding a historical event’ (Goldberg in Ashuntantang, 2012: 54). These films take advantage of film’s potential to “make known,” in order to contribute to the development of meaningful solutions to socio-political problems. In reference to Hollywood films, Ashuntantang however indicates that these films should not be seen as purely representing the voices of the voiceless because they ‘have to negotiate between advocacy for global human rights, presumed audience preferences, and box office figures, which in turn may trump the very rights the films are meant to uphold’ (2012: 54). The need to balance the competing interests involved in the production and distribution of human rights films have resulted in the blurring of the line between official history and popular memory.

In reference to representations of African people, official history does not fall neatly into one homogenous group. There is official history according to the colonial and neo-colonial masters, and there is also official history from the perspectives of African governments or those currently in power. National authorities or the ruling elite in many African countries

often present their versions of history as representing popular memory, and yet such history is often characterised by the exclusion of the perspectives of many people who have no power or the means to express themselves.

Official history and popular memory are also not mutually exclusive. Memory is ‘a social activity, accomplished not in the privacy of one’s own gray matter but via shared consciousness with others’ (Zelizer, 1995: 215). Official history plays a significant role in the socialisation processes, and therefore influences the construction of popular memory, whether such memory is constructed in an oppositional reaction to official history or to compliment such history.

Filmic representations of female minors in African political conflicts are often based on a combination of official history, popular memory and personal history or experience. As such, although it is important to acknowledge such histories, it is more relevant to explore the ideologies that link these sources of narrative material together. Thus, this thesis will look at the influences of official history, dominant ideologies, and contemporary socio-political and economic conditions on the representations of the experiences of girl soldiers that are entering the domains of popular memory.

Strategic Agency and Tactical Agency

We always appear in a world which is a stage ... the masks or roles which the world assigns us, and which we must accept and even acquire if we wish to take part in the world’s play at all, are exchangeable...

Hannah Arendt, 2003: 13

In recent years, there has been increased interest in the investigation of children's agency, especially child soldiers (Baines, 2009; Brett & Specht, 2004; Denov, 2011; Honwana, 2006; Özerdem & Podder, 2011). Agency may be defined as 'the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power' (*Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary*, 2015). Alcinda Honwana defines it as 'the capability of doing something' (2006: 69). Both of these definitions link agency to power, which means those with lesser power have more limitations in terms of the extent to which they are able to act within their given contexts.

If the world is a stage as Arendt suggests, then that stage is made up of a network of power relations, with no particular person or group holding absolute power. If no one has absolute power, then it means no one has complete agency to do as they please. If we assume that there is no absolute power, it becomes possible to imagine that there is no absolute powerlessness, only that some people have more power than others, which means they have a greater capability to act. Once the weakest individuals or groups, in this case, child soldiers, become aware of the stage and how it is set, they can "acquire" the masks they need to survive, or swap their masks to adapt to new situations or approach the same situation differently. However, although no one can see the entire world stage, child soldiers are at a greater disadvantage because their cognitive and analytical skills have not developed to the same level as that of adults. Thus, it is important to consider the forms of agency that child soldiers may or may not have.

In her research, Sukanya Podder found that 'recruitment and re-recruitment in various armed groups ... were mediated both by the push of war – induced hardship and the pull of recruitment appeals [... such as the] opportunity for rise to prominence' (Podder in Özerdem & Podder, 2011: 11). These findings support the idea that child soldiers exercise active

agency as they navigate their social circumstances, and also make ‘deliberate tactical choice[s] in surviving a dangerous landscape’ (Özerdem & Podder, 2011: 11). Social navigation can be defined as ‘the way in which war-affected young people assess the changes within their socio-political environment, evaluate the emerging possibilities within this environment and, accordingly, direct their lives in the most beneficial and advantageous ways’ (Denov, 2011: 191). Child soldiers may not have the power to change their environment, but they can improve their chances for survival.

Honwana (2006) outlines two types of agency: strategic agency and tactical agency. For a person to have strategic agency, he/she needs to be in a position of power, be ‘fully conscious of the ultimate goals of their actions,’ and ‘anticipate any long-term gains or benefits’ (Honwana, 2006: 51). Because child soldiers lack these three characteristics that would make their actions strategic, they exercise what Honwana refers to as ‘tactical agency or an agency of the weak’ (2006: 73). As De Certeau states, a tactic is ‘a manoeuvre within the enemy’s field of vision’ (De Certeau in Honwana, 2006: 70). Honwana argues that child soldiers have tactical agency because ‘they are fully conscious of the immediate returns and they act, within certain constraints, to seize opportunities that are available to them’ (2006: 51). This, however, seems to apply largely to children in films about African postcolonial wars. In films about anti-colonial struggles, children have an understanding of the ultimate goals of the struggle and can anticipate long-term gains. They may exercise their agency within certain limitations, but the adults who lead them are not represented as “the enemy.” Strategic agency may therefore exist when children voluntarily “participate” in political conflicts, whereas tactical agency may be evident where children are “used” (often by adults) in political conflicts. But both forms of agency exist within limitations, and in some postcolonial wars, child soldiers also seem to possess some form of strategic agency by

making decisions based on their long-term plans. In Liberia, for instance, Charles Taylor's armed forces promised children from poor communities 'free access to education after the end of war,' and in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), some former child soldiers said they joined to receive a reward after the war (Gates, 2011: 34).

The above concepts are used within a certain framework which guides the ideas of the author of this thesis in understanding how the society works. This framework is outlined below.

Methods and Methodology

This thesis locates the representations of girls who participate in African political conflicts within local and global contexts. The author uses a sociological approach which 'assumes that films can be studied as social indicators of the society from which they have emerged' (Tomaselli, 2015: 11). Linking film to society is achieved through a cultural approach that combines textual and contextual approaches. A textual approach considers film as a text that conveys meaning through its presentation of images and sound, and "reads" from it 'information about the cultural function of film' (Turner, 2009: 179). On the other hand, 'contextual approaches tend to analyse the cultural, political, institutional, and industrial determinants' of a film industry and how these 'affect the textual form of a film ... well before it is seen' by its audience (Turner, 2009: 179-180). These two approaches are complementary because production and reception processes are both related to ideologies (Turner, 2009: 180). Within this framework, therefore, the author looks at film as ideology (Fourie, 2007: 7).

O'Shaughnessy and Stadler define ideology as 'social values, ideas, beliefs, feelings, and representations' constituting the world view (2005: 152). Graeme Turner argues that

‘although ideology itself has no material form, we can see its material effects in all social and political formations, from class structure to gender relations to our idea of what constitutes an individual’ (2009: 180). Echoing a similar sentiment, Keyan Tomaselli explains ideologies as ‘semantic grids through which signs are discursively filtered’ (2015: 7). Since films are cultural products, they can be ‘mined for ideological evidence: for what they can reveal about the attitudes or shared values of a society at a particular time, or over time’ (Bickford-Smith & Mendelsohn, 2003: 4).

Ideology is often imagined in terms of power relations, with the powerful, or those who own the means of production, imposing their ideas (Turner, 2009; O’Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2005). Film can therefore be seen as contributing to the generation of ‘a body of assertions that reflect a set of social relations that entail social domination and conceal the elements of domination in the act of legitimising it’ (Harrow, 2007: 123). However, the way ideology works is contested. Susan Sontag states that ‘ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts [and] feelings’ (2004: 77). But Tomaselli notes that although signs conceal ideologies, ‘meanings encoded by the director [of a film] are ... decoded, negotiated and even rejected by audiences’ (2015: 7). This author agrees with Tomaselli’s statement in its implication that dominant ideologies do not simply impose their will on both filmmakers and audiences.

The author considers representations in films as reflecting centres of power not necessarily through supporting such centres. Films can also challenge dominant ideologies or reflect shifting power dynamics, even though those who produce them have to work within limitations. Therefore, the films in this thesis are analysed within the framework of Harry

Garuba and Natasha Himmelman's concept of 'the cited and the uncited' images (2012) discussed earlier. The aim for this is to consider whether these films are revolutionary or simply conforming to 'popular global narratives,' thus becoming 'cultural communicators of the status quo' (Taylor-Jones, 2016: 180).

The author acknowledges that, as Kenneth Harrow argues, demystifications and 'the sites of enunciation of demystifications' are themselves ideological (2007: 126). This thesis is therefore not operating outside of ideology as there is no such space. The author also acknowledges that film is part of the 'visual documentation and narrative of everyday life and history' (Fourie 2007: 7). This is especially so in the case of films about African anti-colonial struggles and postcolonial wars because these films have some basis in reality. Ideological influences are then reflected in the narratives that filmmakers privilege among the many alternatives, and the ways they choose to tell the stories.

Many films on African postcolonial wars focus mainly on the violence and pay little attention to the context of the wars. This thesis will contextualise both the films and the wars they depict in an attempt to broaden the understanding of the representations of female minors in the case study films. This will help to consider why, for instance, in films about anti-colonial struggles the female children are given personal responsibility for their actions, whereas in films about postcolonial wars they are stripped of most of that responsibility. Attention is placed on the nuances of the relationship between representations and dominant ideologies.

When put together, the four case study films, all of which have female minors as main characters, represent different historical moments in relation to developments in the general local and international views on Africa's postcolonial progress, or rather regression, if one

considers the downward trajectory from optimism to pessimism that these views have taken. The four films can be seen as progressive because they bring out of the shadows experiences of war and conflict of girls from marginal societies so that their struggles and achievements are not ignored. Although there has been an increase in the presence and representations of African girls on film, it is not enough to simply look at quantity. There is a need to also consider the quality of the representations to see whether the films represent the girls in ways that have a useful and positive effect on their identities and experiences. This is something that may not be important for films that depict dominant cultural identities, but is significant for marginalised groups (Turner, 2009: 172). The thesis highlights areas of concern in the representations of girls in African conflicts by looking at the possible effects of these representations on the way the identities of girl soldiers and that of African girls in general are understood. It follows therefore that the films will be analysed using a qualitative approach, that is, the study is interpretive and descriptive.

The analysis will include a critical examination of both the narrative and visual elements of these films as well as an exploration of their production contexts. The thesis links such analysis to written or recorded interviews with child soldiers, for example, in documentaries, so as to provide an insight into how child soldiers or former child soldiers self-identify. The thesis also extensively explores the recorded histories of the countries represented in order to find links, or lack thereof, between the official history and the experiences represented in these films. In addition, the thesis also includes a close analysis of relevant written academic and other reputable texts. The idea is to find the relationships, and perhaps discrepancies, among the representations of African girl soldiers on film, how real-life girl soldiers self-identify, and the general/dominant views that guide the imagination of African girl soldiers.

Chapter Outline

The next section of the thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapters Two to Six are divided strategically to emphasise that production and consumption contexts matter when analysing filmic representations of female minors who participate in African conflicts. And Chapter Seven concludes the study. Below is a brief outline of the chapters.

Chapter Two expands on the theoretical background started in Chapter One. It surveys films about African child soldiers in order to assess the presence of girls in meaningful roles and map out the context within which the films that make up the focal point of this study exist. This is followed by the main section of this thesis, which consists of a close analysis of the four case study films, *Sarafina!*, *Flame*, *Heart of Fire* and *War Witch*. The films are separated into four different chapters and arranged in chronological order.

The first film to be analysed, in Chapter Three, is *Sarafina!*. Representations in the optimistic *Sarafina!* are used to mark a trajectory that leads to the representations in *Flame*, discussed in Chapter Four, which is characterised by postcolonial disillusionment. Both films represent African nationalist struggles against forms of colonial rule.

Heart of Fire, in Chapter Five, provides what might be a bridge between *Flame*, which represents a purely anti-colonial war and *War Witch*, in Chapter Six, which represents a purely postcolonial war. This is because although *Heart of Fire* is set during the Eritrean War of Independence from Ethiopia, it focuses on the conflict between two Eritrean military groups, the Jebha and the Shabia.

Representations in *War Witch* are then used to further demonstrate the shift in the representations of female minors from the anti-colonial wars to the postcolonial wars. The film shows the influences of global politics on the representations of the African girl and the wars she is caught up in.

The final chapter, Chapter Seven: Conclusion, brings together the ideas of the previous chapters in a summary of the study. The summary also acknowledges some of the limitations of the study and offers suggestions for further study.

Chapter Two

Women, Girls and the Child Soldier: Ideological Framing

Introduction

The camera's gaze implies a politicized vantage point from which the body is inscribed with ideas. To look, therefore, is to enter into discourse with the bodies of others. To look at the bodies of others is, also, to take a political position.

Kgafela Oa Magogodi, 2002: 247

The representations of girls in films about African political conflicts bring to bear the intersection between gender and age within specific historical contexts. The representations of girls can therefore not be considered without looking at the representations of women in political conflicts. Over the years, there have been many debates regarding the identities and roles of African women. These debates have been compounded by the blurring of cultural boundaries resulting from the hybridity bred by globalisation, as many different cultures borrow from each other. Some African women, such as writer Buchi Emecheta, have refused to call themselves feminists because they do not subscribe to the idea of feminism as propagated by Euro-American academics and activists (Mikell, 1995: 406). On the other hand, Clenora Hudson-Weems argues that 'when Africana [sic] women come along and embrace feminism, they are in reality duplicating the duplicate' (2003: 156). She explains that feminists took the life-style and practices of the Africana women activists they came into contact with 'from the beginning of American slavery, all the way up to the modern Civil Rights Movement,' and used 'them as models or blueprints for the framework of their theory'

(ibid.). In 1995, Gwendolyn Mikell published an article in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2, in which she writes that she is ‘observing the birth of feminism on the African continent – a feminism that is political, pragmatic, reflexive, and group oriented’ (1995: 405). This “rebirth” is reflected in the 1990s films such as *Sarafina!* and *Flame*, in which feminist ideas are represented within the context of the excesses of the youthful energy of the young.

While *Sarafina!* and *Flame* represent a progressive shift in the representations of women’s agency, the shift from focusing on older women to focusing on younger women carries some implications. For instance, it can be seen as a failure to reconcile the stereotypical image of the “African traditional woman” with the “new” feminist ideas. In that regard, Sarafina in *Sarafina!* and Florence in *Flame*, come to represent the politically conscious and active female that older women such as those in films like *Sambizanga* (Sarah Maldoror, 1973)³³ and *Mapantsula* (Oliver Schmitz, 1988)³⁴ are not able to be. In other words, Sarafina and Florence reflect progress in as far as female agency is concerned, but also deny older women the possibility of being viewed in a similar light.

In *Sambizanga*, Maria lives a very sheltered life in a small village, Dondo, which accommodates construction workers like Maria’s husband, Domingos. While women are confined to the domestic sphere, men are exposed to the brutalities of the Portuguese colonial rule, especially through their slave-labour-like work at the construction site. Maria is only exposed to the brutalities of colonial rule when Domingos is arrested, and she leaves home to

³³ *Sambizanga* is set in colonial Angola and follows the story of Maria as she leaves her village in search of her husband, Domingos, after he is arrested by the police.

³⁴ *Mapantsula* is set in apartheid South Africa and tells the story of a petty gangster, Panic, who goes through a process of political conscientisation after being arrested by the police. Although the film mainly focuses on the male anti-hero, it also explores the experiences of women through the characters of Ma Modise, Panic’s landlady, and Pat, Panic’s girlfriend.

look for him. Maria is characterised by a lack of knowledge to the point where the process of her political conscientisation seems so sudden and brutal, as if representing some form of “first contact.” In Maria, we see a woman who, to use Maldoror’s words, has ‘no idea at all what “independence” means’ (1977: 307). Similarly, in *Mapantsula* we see two women, Ma Modise and Pat, who only seem concerned with their immediate survival needs rather than the broader demands of the political situation. The two women do not seem to fully realise the link between their immediate experiences and the broader context within which they live.

In the 1990s, the image of the African woman in anti-colonial conflicts presented in *Sambizanga* and *Mapantsula* is displaced by the youth or young girls who have been “exposed” to newer ideas. The African woman is not allowed to reach political maturity on her own terms, as children come to represent the “new woman.”³⁵ The figure of the girl, therefore, ‘offers an accessible way to debate the legacy of feminism and the impact of globalisation on gender roles and identities in the contemporary world’ (Handyside & Taylor-Jones, 2016: 3). *Flame* and *Sarafina!* represent adolescent girls, Florence and Sarafina respectively, who are going through a stage of puberty, a stage which is stereotypically ‘characterised by feelings of opposition and resistance to authority and power structures in the family, at school, and at state level’ (Brett & Specht, 2004: 3). Their rebelliousness is therefore very much tied to age, which brings into question whether it is a more permanent development or simply a phase they are going through before they mature into more acceptable versions of womanhood.

³⁵ Ousmane Sembene’s 1975 film *Xala* represents a similar dynamic in the relationship between mother and daughter. Françoise Pfaff notes that in the film one of the female characters, Awa, represents a traditional woman whereas her daughter, Rama, ‘serves as a metaphor for a future Africa’ (1982). However, Rama does not participate in wider national politics in the same way that Sarafina and Flame do.

Handyside and Taylor-Jones state that the ‘relationship between feminism and girls has been uneasy, with women reluctant to be identified with/as girls’ (2016: 4). Girls occupy the space where the female is not yet firmly bound by tradition. They are characterised by a certain flexibility which is often denied to older African women. Older African women are seen as bound by what W. O. Maloba sees as invented rigid African traditions with clearly defined hierarchical structures and characterised ‘by an acceptance of custom’ (2007: 6). Invented tradition can be defined as ‘a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’ (ibid.). However, such continuity with the ‘historic past ... is largely fictitious’ (ibid.). Thus, the differences between the representations of women and girls can be seen as reflecting a disjuncture between women’s experiences and the perceived image of the traditional woman.

Additionally, the differences between the representations of women and girls may result in the actions of girls like Sarafina and Flame being viewed as only temporary departures rather than significant challenges to patriarchy. After all, girls grow up to be women. Women’s relationship with the nation is often seen as a flexible one in which women can venture into political action in times of crisis, but have to return home once the crisis is averted (Lyons, 2004: 21). The girls give a glimpse of the potential of the female figure, and yet restrict such potential to the child, who may or may not continue on that path of political consciousness and participation. In *Flame*, we see the female war hero, Florence, as having grown, after the war, into a woman who is a shell of her former self. Although Florence’s regression is linked to the betrayal of women in postcolonial Zimbabwe as patriarchal authorities renege on the

promises of independence and neglect the rights of women, it is also presented as transformation to a form of “traditional womanhood.”³⁶

The link between women’s and girls’ identities is therefore important when considering representations of girl soldiers. But the intention should not be to conflate women with girls. Girl soldiers have largely been neglected in academic research. Researchers with feminist perspectives often focus on African women in general, ignoring the fact that female minors may have different experiences from adult women, and therefore require separate attention. It is for this reason that this thesis dedicates its attention to the representation of girls involved in African political conflicts. In pursuance of this goal, the author also looks at the influence of film production conditions on representations.

Production and Consumption Conditions

Socio-Political Conditions

Although *Sarafina!* and *Flame*’s representations of girls’ participation in anti-colonial conflicts can be seen as ideological manifestations, the representations are also based on historical actuality. Some African girls were politically aware and active during anti-colonial struggles. For instance, some Mozambican women who served as children in the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) during their war against Portuguese rule

³⁶ Traditional womanhood is used here to refer to womanhood that is defined by motherhood and domesticity. Lizelle Bisschoff points out that the emphasis on motherhood may sometimes be problematic because ‘motherhood has become equated with victimhood as a result of conflating motherhood as an *institution* and motherhood as an *experience* (emphasis added), the difference being that patriarchy constructs the institution of motherhood while women experience it’ (2010: 43). She further states that ‘African feminist theorising about motherhood has shifted ... in terms of articulating the affirmative aspects of motherhood, and separating motherhood from victimhood’ (ibid.).

considered their participation in combat as an active challenge to colonial rule and patriarchy (Denov, 2010: 41).³⁷ Brett and Specht mention that ‘girls articulated their involvement in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and against the Indonesian occupation in East Timor in terms of the independence of their countries’ (2004: 87). In more recent years, however, there has been a shift to the ‘conception of childhood innocence [that] presumes [...] children exist in a space beyond, above, outside the political’ (Henry Jenkins in Taylor-Jones, 2016: 182). In filmic representations of the more recent African postcolonial wars, children have become tragic victims trapped in political situations they cannot get themselves out of.

In a study of the James Bond films, Bennett and Woollacott note that the way in which these films represent Bond has shifted over time depending on the production and social contexts (in Turner, 2009: 165-168). They explain these shifts through the idea of “inter-textuality.” In this case, “inter-textuality” is used to refer to the ‘complex relationships between texts and the social conditions of their production and consumption’ (Turner, 2009: 166). Similarly, representations of child soldiers and the interpretations thereof can be seen as “inter-textual.” Just like James Bond in the Bond films, representations of African child soldiers on film can be seen as a reflection of their times, that is, as reflecting the shifting socio-political conditions. However, child soldiers are not seen as fictional characters in the same way that Bond is. Representations of the experiences of African child soldiers are more closely linked to the realities of African child soldiers despite the fact that the representations may not necessarily represent the voices of the children.

³⁷ The acronym FRELIMO comes from the Portuguese *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*.

Production Conditions

The very nature of film is that it can only present a mediated voice. And the production conditions of films about the participation of girls in African political conflicts often means that there are at least five categories of mediation, which move the final representations further and further away from those represented, both geographically and ideologically:

1. Film Technology

Cheaper digital equipment has, in some instances, managed to bridge the gap between those represented and those who make films. This can be seen, for example, in the Nollywood representations of the “everyday.” However, films about political conflicts, especially those that include armed combat, are not as easy or as cheap to make because they require more equipment and technical expertise. It is no coincidence that filmmakers with access to money and who can afford to employ experts and get more sophisticated equipment are the ones who often make films about political conflicts. These include African filmmakers in the Diaspora, or experienced filmmakers who have already proven themselves. For example: Mahamat Saleh Haroun who directed *A Screaming Man* (2010), which explores experiences of the postcolonial war in Chad; Haile Gerima, who directed *Teza* (2008), which explores the violent confrontations in Ethiopia during Haile Mariam Mengistu’s regime; and Newton I. Aduaka, who directed *Ezra* (2007), which explores the experiences of a child soldier who was abducted and forced to join a rebel group. Child soldiers have no access to the required technical skills or equipment necessary to enable them to tell their own stories through film. There have been instances of former child soldiers who have managed to tell their stories through writing books. Examples are Ishmael Beah, who wrote *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007), and Senait Mehari, who wrote *Heart of Fire: From Child Soldier to Soul Singer* (2006). These publications indicate the desire by child soldiers or, as in this case,

former child soldiers, to represent their experiences in their own way, something they cannot easily do through film.

2. The Filmmakers

This category is closely linked to the first one above. Because child soldiers or children involved in political conflicts have to rely on others to represent them, filmmakers who make films about child soldiers are often outsiders looking into the lives of children in African conflicts. They are outsiders in terms of age, class, cultural background and experiences. Myriam Denov argues that given the marginalisation of child soldiers' perspectives, 'there is a compelling rationale to develop alternative visions of child soldiers that are grounded in the perspectives of the children themselves' (2010: 17). This is what filmmakers such as Cary Joji Fukunaga, with *Beasts of No Nation* (2015), and Kim Nguyen, with *War Witch*, attempt to do in the sense that it is child soldier characters in the films who narrate the stories. Fukunaga and Nguyen demonstrate that child soldiers are 'rational human actors ... [who have a] mature understanding of their predicament' (Peters and Richards in Denov, 2010: 20). The use of the "I" in the narration also point to an insistence on the particular rather than the general. But, as discussed in the section on "realism" in Chapter One, sometimes the nature of presentation can simply provide the guise of an added measure of "authenticity" that hides the power relations between filmmakers and those represented, or the ideologies the films seek to perpetuate. Cheryl Sterling argues that 'representations of African conflicts generate a discourse of self-deception or perversion as it is rarely about Africa but rather about the subjectivity and subconscious of the Western interpellator' (2010: 196). Who tells the story, and the perspective from which they tell it therefore matters. Stories from the perspectives of girl soldiers have greater potential to broaden our understanding of their experiences.

3. Gender

Lisa Downing argues that ‘the discursive difficulty of representing the underage killer is especially true in the case of girls who kill, since innocence and monstrous evil born of weakness are also the incompatible dual faces of otherness that accrue to the feminine in our cultural unconscious’ (2016: 155). This difficulty is further compounded by the fact that those gendered as female have very limited opportunities to articulate, whether verbally or visually, their own roles and experiences. Of the four films under study, a woman directed only one, *Flame*. Films about girls who participate in political conflicts tend to be presented from a male perspective, and this limits access to the insights on how the girls in these situations self-identify. Sheilla Petty rightly points out that the work of ‘female film-makers may have as much or more in common with other works by African men within the *oeuvre* of African cinema’ (2012: 146). This does not however discount the need for more female film directors. Lizelle Bisschoff problematises ‘the fact that women direct far fewer films than men,’ arguing that this ‘results in an imbalanced representation of sociocultural complexities as well as disproportionate representations of individual and collective subjectivities and identities’ (2012: 159). Tanya Lyons notes that in war stories women are ‘mainly represented by men, as biologically determined and socially constructed wives, mothers, or sisters’ (2004: 27). As such, ‘women and girls are often focused upon as symbolic bearers of ideas of nationhood and/or ethnic identity due to their reproductive abilities and their roles in the social communication of group identity’ (Taylor-Jones, 2016: 183). As an embodiment of ideas, girl soldiers become not only what girls ought not to be, but also symbols of the death of a community as they can no longer be in a position to maintain their community’s group identity. In *Johnny Mad Dog*, for example, Laokole is contrasted to the girls who, unlike her, become soldiers. She remains a nurturer, thus retaining the qualities of acceptable girlhood

and womanhood, providing hope for the survival of the community, as symbolised by her looking after the orphaned child she finds at the refugee camp.

4. Age

As children, girls have to rely on adults to tell their stories. Thus, their stories are often told by adult males, as is the case with *Sarafina!*, *Heart of Fire* and *War Witch*. Lisa Downing suggests that ‘there are very limited discursive means for talking about the child who kills’ (2016: 155). When talking about this child, adults often ‘evoke the failure of the ideal of “childhood innocence,” ... or ... view children as harbingers: morally weak, and therefore innately susceptible to evil’ (ibid.). It should not be assumed that adults understand the experiences of these children by virtue of having been children themselves, especially when they have never experienced anything like what these children go through; when they have never entered what Downing calls ‘an indeterminate realm of ontological and taxonomical confusion’ (2016: 155). Even memoirs written by adults who are former child soldiers, such as *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (Beah, 2007) and *Heart of Fire: From Child Soldier to Soul Singer* (Mehari, 2006), cannot be fully reliable. This is because they constitute ‘a reconstruction after the fact, after the trauma and its subsequent repression and forgetting’ (Harrow, 2013: 3). Both Ishmael Beah and Senait Mehari have been accused of embellishing the truth. In an article published online by *Slate*, Gabriel Sherman reports on allegations that ‘Beah grossly exaggerated his story,’ including the length of the period in which he was a child soldier (2008). Mehari was sued by some of the people she includes in her book ‘for defamatory statements’ (Helff, 2015: 12). Kirk Honeycutt of *The Hollywood Reporter* wrote that some of the child soldiers who were in the same military group as Mehari sued her for ‘fictionalizing much of her account’ (2008). However, the issue here is not to examine the veracity of said accounts, but rather to acknowledge that adults’ recollection of their

childhood may also be unreliable. According to Sissy Helff, in 1899 Freud argued that ‘many people recollect their past and childhood incorrectly, less to consciously beguile the listeners than to screen the more distressing parts of the past’ (2015: 1). It is therefore possible that some former child soldiers recollect the past in ways that serve ‘as a form of unconscious selfprotection against the unspeakable and the uncanny buried in the past’ (ibid.).

5. The Funding

Because many African governments have neglected the development of the film industry, or because many African countries cannot afford to fund high-budget films, African filmmakers often find it difficult to raise money for their films (Leander, 2008: 16). For instance, after suffering huge losses from its financial contribution to the production of what Teresa Barnes describes as ‘an awful Hollywood production of *King Solomon’s Mines* [J. Lee Thompson, 1985]’ (2007: 242), and Sir Richard Attenborough’s *Cry Freedom* (1987), the Zimbabwean government decided to stop investing financially in commercial film production (Hungwe, 2005: 88). Funding for films requiring significant budgets often comes from sources external to Africa. *Flame*, for example, was funded by Media for Development Trust (MFD) (Fisher, 2010: 114).³⁸ The South African film, *Sarafina!* was co-funded by South Africa, United Kingdom, France, and the United States of America. Another reason for external funding is the lack of a significant local audience. In 2007 Martin Botha noted that local filmmakers in South Africa were struggling to find a local audience and ‘audience attendance at South African cinemas [was] decreasing at an alarming rate’ (2007: 42). International funders often ensure international distribution, and therefore an international audience. Leander points out

³⁸ MFD is a sub-division of Media for Development International (MFDI), ‘an umbrella organization set up by DSR [Development Through Self-Reliance] to deal specifically with its film-making activities in Africa and Asia’ (Fisher, 2010: 114). DSR is ‘a US based NGO concerned with promoting development in so-called ‘third world’ countries’ (ibid.).

that having a film marketed by international media giants such as Warner Bros. Pictures can guarantee access to a huge distribution network (2008: 15). But, as Graeme Turner notes, film institutions also have political interests, and these interests determine which films are made and/or seen (2009: 182). Filmmakers have to consider the interests of the funders, whether they are human rights organisations or commercial institutions.

According to Leander, when speaking of his film *Blood Diamond* (2006), Zwick admits that ‘it would be “disingenuous” to pretend that he could have obtained the same financial backing and publicity if he had tried to make a film with a Black storyline and a Black star instead of one centring on a white mercenary and a (pretty) white female journalist’ (2008: 17). Funding therefore influences the kinds of stories that are told. Zwick’s statement also implies that the film was made with a certain audience in mind – the Euro-American audience who would find it easier to relate to the white characters.³⁹ Graeme Turner notes that theories on audience response suggest that ‘processes through which the audience identify with what they see on the screen’ is linked to ‘the ways in which [they] construct their own identities within society’ (2009: 150). Films such as *Blood Diamond* should therefore be seen as a reflection on the way the Euro-American world constructs its identity.

Kate Taylor-Jones argues that the girl soldier is often ‘used to uphold the narratives of development, gender, and politics that the global North expects’ (Taylor-Jones, 2016: 188). In that regard, representations of girl soldiers in postcolonial conflicts can be seen as closely linked to the negative views about Africa, that is, neo-colonial views that are widely held in the Euro-American world.

³⁹ It should be noted however that audience members do not necessarily respond to films in the same way.

The Child Soldier and Afro-pessimism

Filmic representations of postcolonial wars in Africa reflect the Afro-pessimistic tendencies that have taken root in recent years. Afro-pessimism can be defined as ‘the pervasive feeling in some quarters that Africa is doomed’ (Okigbo, 1995: 111). Okigbo notes that in the postcolonial era, ‘the “knocking game” of denigrating Africa and Africans has changed to the dubious prognostication about Africa’s hopeless future’ (Okigbo, 1995: 113). Afro-pessimist concerns include ‘the warped economic arrangements of the criminal state; the “resource curse” hypothesis; the phenomenon of the child soldier...; genocide; a new sympathy for white colonisers after independence; and kleptocracy and the “big man” syndrome’ (Evans & Glenn, 2010: 1). In film, afro-pessimism is reflected in images that represent postcolonial Africa as more brutal than it was represented in earlier films such as *Out of Africa* (Sydney Pollack, 1985), which often used racist, old colonial stereotypes (Evans & Glenn, 2010). The subject of African child soldiers has provided an avenue for the expression of afro-pessimistic ideas.

Films about anti-colonial wars offer child soldiers whose noble sacrifices are not undermined by ‘tropes of abuse and exploitation’ (Rosen & Rosen, 2012: 310). They also offer narratives which suggest ‘that children do, in fact, have agency and the mental capacity to take action against the wrongs they witness in their world’ (ibid.). On the other hand, in films about postcolonial wars, children no longer react to the wrongs done to “their world.” Rather, the focus is now on the horrendous wrongs done to the “helpless” children. Child soldiers have become a reflection of ‘the failure of African states and societies to guarantee a ‘universal right’ of children’ (Martins, 2011: 436).

Additionally, children who participated in anti-colonial wars are often portrayed as capable of maintaining their humanity, enabling them to re-join their communities as full participants and significant contributors. But children who participate in the postcolonial wars ‘have generally been assumed to be permanently damaged,’ and are often portrayed as largely threatening, uncivilised and pathological (Denov, 2010: 6-7). An example of such portrayal is in *Johnny Mad Dog* where we can contrast Laokole, who is not a child soldier, to Mad Dog who is. Laokole takes on a little girl, Mayama, whom she then looks after when she discovers that her parents are dead, and only uses violence when it is necessary to defend herself against Mad Dog. On the other hand, after being told that the war is over, Mad Dog still uses violence to get his way. And, although the rebels win the war, Mad Dog does not receive a hero’s welcome. Laokole calls him a killer rather than a soldier, implying that even in retrospect, the child soldier’s cruelty and killing cannot be justified by the conditions of the war. Child soldiers have become the true definition of a lost generation.

Several Hollywood films that deal with African postcolonial wars, for example *Blood Diamond*, do not meaningfully attempt to explore the causes and objectives of these wars. When referring to Sierra Leone, Susan Shepler states that the war has been understood ‘as a crisis of youth,’ in which lack of educational opportunities and unemployment ‘made legions of disaffected youth ripe for recruitment’ (2005: 198). But *Blood Diamond* focuses on linking the illegal diamond trade to the Sierra Leonean war, while ignoring other factors which also contributed to the war such as governmental corruption, poverty and economic grievances (Shepler, 2005). These significant omissions and the film’s marginalisation of local ideas and identities do not make *Blood Diamond* less believable, especially to the international audience. Anna Leander states that ‘a recurring comment by reviewers of *Blood Diamond* is that the film is unabashedly faithful to reality in its presentation of Africa and African

conflicts' (2008: 8). African postcolonial wars have come to represent one of the many symptoms of the degenerative state that some people, especially proponents of neo-colonial ideas, believe Africa is in. In films about African conflicts, this degenerative state is also represented by the replacement of the older, politically conscious child, such as Sarafina and Florence, with much younger children, such as Awet in *Heart of Fire* and Komona in *War Witch*. These much younger girls assist in the provision of a more effective visualisation of the human cost of the failed African states.

When discussing *Johnny Mad Dog* (Sauvaire, 2008), Christine Singer and Lindiwe Dovey state that the film 'elevates the Western cinematic value of visuality over dialogue' (2012: 155), which privileges witnessing over critical engagement. Such films serve to confirm the already existing images of postcolonial Africa which largely consist of what Sontag refers to as 'unforgettable photographs of large eyed victims' (2004: 63). Many filmmakers, critics and academics have criticised such representations. For instance, Anna Leander suggests that Newton Aduaka, the director of *Ezra* (2007), 'sees his film as an alternative framing to that of *Blood Diamond*,' and that 'he reverses the order of importance, upgrading Black lives and politics' (Leander, 2008: 14). Aduaka also seems to "upgrade" not only black males' lives, but black females' too. Leander points out that in *Blood Diamond*, black women are 'remarkably absent ... there are no Black women with a character anywhere in sight' (Leander, 2008: 11). For instance, Solomon Vandy's wife and daughter only appear a few times and 'black civilian women are running, shot and scared in some of the violence the film depicts' (Leander, 2008: 11). The film ignores the grievances of black women and young girls.

Even films that have been praised for providing an African perspective, such as Aduaka's *Ezra*, also make compromises that limit the more truthful representations of African circumstances and experiences. For example, Aduaka simplifies the conflict in *Ezra* 'into two clearly distinguished opposing sides which make it easy to follow and pass judgment' (Leander, 2008: 14). Films like *Heart of Fire* and *War Witch* fill in the gap of the missing voice of African girls affected by war, but they also visualise the failed African states. To an extent, they cite the neo-colonial archive of stereotypical images.

Child Soldiers and "the Single Story"

When referring to the representations of child soldiers in African postcolonial conflicts, Catarina Martins suggests that ideological influences have resulted in what she refers to as 'the single story' (2011: 434).⁴⁰ For instance, the contemporary general characterisation of child soldiers includes 'forced recruitment ... being forced to kill ... being witness to extreme acts of violence' and being subjected to extreme forms of bodily harm including 'brutal beatings, rape or sexual slavery' (Martins, 2011: 437). This characterisation leads to an understanding of child soldiers 'as the victims of adult abuse and criminality, who have been transformed into combatants in violation of their essential qualities as children' (Rosen & Rosen, 2012: 305). This understanding is largely influenced by a humanitarian discourse about children which is usually found in reports compiled by 'non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, and in United Nations agencies such as UNICEF' (ibid.). These organisations usually apply the Euro-American definition of childhood and use child soldiers

⁴⁰ Martins' use of the phrase "the single story" is inspired by the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Martins, 2011: 445). Adichie, speaking at a conference, warns that only hearing a single story about a community, person or country may result in stereotypes and incomplete and potentially damaging views about them (Adichie, 2009).

as ‘the symbol of nearly everything that is wrong with war’ (ibid.). In order to emphasise the barbaric nature of postcolonial wars, ‘one of the demands of humanitarian discourse is to represent the traumatic past as a time of unrelenting terror and suffering’ (Edmondson, 2005: 469). Harrow argues that many people who have represented child soldiers in their work have created ‘a vision of Africa and its recent experience of violence as the site of contestation among really “evil” people, their victims and their rescuers’ (2013: 7). MaryEllen Higgins suggests that in such representations, the rescuers are often Euro-American (2012: 9). Additionally, Laura Edmondson notes that the victims to be rescued are often ‘uniformly cast as symbols of helplessness’ (2005: 459). Examples of such representations that call for Euro-American rescue can be found in films such as *Blood Diamond* and *The Constant Gardener* (Fernando Meirelles, 2005). While this structure simplifies and helps to tell a compelling story, it sacrifices the multiplicity of experiences and voices.

When discussing the activities of World Vision in Uganda,⁴¹ Laura Edmondson states that the staff of the organisation ‘seemed intent on playing to the world as well as rebuilding it’ (2005: 457). For instance, when the staff presented to visitors the artistic work of the children whom the organisation was looking after, the work was treated as a marketing tool. They ‘used representations of life in captivity as evidence of suffering, and light-hearted drawings as affirmations of World Vision’s success at rehabilitation,’ but without mentioning that the children’s work was actually graded and thus not necessarily independent artistic expressions (ibid.). The staff can therefore be seen as performers on the world stage who know the “mask” they have to wear in order to ensure the survival of their organisation so that it can work towards its goals.

⁴¹ World Vision is an international Christian humanitarian organization whose aim is to ‘[work] with children, families, and their communities worldwide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice’ (World Vision, 2016).

Honwana argues that the agency/client dynamic that exists between humanitarian non-governmental organisations and the people they support creates mutual dependency: ‘On the one hand, NGOs need the victims and their stories to fulfil their sense of mission as providers of humanitarian assistance; on the other hand, the victims quickly understand that their status as victims is crucial to obtaining aid’ (2006: 15). This suggests that the representations we see on film of child soldiers as victims are not a simple case of identities being imposed on child soldiers by filmmakers; child soldiers also use victimcy as a tool for social navigation. As Utas states, victimcy, or ‘the agency of presenting oneself as a victim,’ is ‘a key tool in the toolbox of a former child soldier’ (2011: 215). Some communities have also been known to ‘organize their self-presentation around the idea of “war-affected youth”’ in order to gain access to international aid (Shepler, 2005: 206). This need to “play the victim” is a reflection of the ideological pressures that former child soldiers find themselves under.

The “single story” has led to the creation of a “Hollywood authenticity,” which has rendered alternative ways of picturing child soldiers invisible (Leander, 2008: 8). Films such as *Ezra*, which provide alternative views, and are not produced through the Hollywood machinery, do not usually get as much distribution as Hollywood films such as *Hotel Rwanda* (Terry George, 2004) and *Blood Diamond* (Edward Zwick, 2006).⁴² The single story is also reinforced in documentaries such as *Chain of Tears* (Toni Strasburg, 1988), *Bling: A Planet Rock* (Raquel Cepeda, 2007), *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (Gini Reticker, 2008), *Return to Freetown* (McCullagh, 2001) and *Grace, Milly, Lucy...Child Soldiers* (Provencher, 2010).

⁴² The character of the girl soldier, Mariam, in Newton Aduaka’s film *Ezra* (2007), is not kidnapped or forced to join a rebel group, she voluntarily joins in order to fight what she perceives as social, economic and political injustices in her country, Sierra Leone.

The dominant ways of understanding child soldiers may be silencing these children ‘according to varied political agendas’ (Martins, 2011: 435).

Films, both fictional and documentary, also tend to focus on children who, at some point, reject their military groups. Yet, Scott Gates discovered that even in cases where children are abducted, many of them ‘remain loyal to the organisation well into adulthood’ (2011: 30). Gates attributes this to the ‘process of organisational socialisation,’ which leads to the internalisation of the organisation’s norms and rules (ibid.). Checkel, in Lotte Vermeij (2011: 182), suggests that ‘socialisation leads to Type I or II internalisation.’ Type I involves conscious role playing, whereas in Type II agents adopt the interests or even the identity of their community, and the values of that community become for them ‘the right thing to do’ (ibid.). Vermeij notes that from the total number of the former child soldiers they interviewed, a clear majority had reached Type II internalisation (2011: 182). This seems to support the idea of child soldiers as “brainwashed.” But we could also consider Type II internalisation as a function of tactical agency, with child soldiers adopting the interests of their community as a survival tactic. In this case, rehabilitation processes for former child soldiers would then enable these children to “acquire” new masks that are appropriate to their new conditions.

Rebels are often represented as ‘demons, hyped up on drugs, who [kidnap] children and [turn] them into monsters’ (Harrow, 2013: 8). Within this view, children are then represented as committing war crimes ‘under the effect of drugs, under death threats or as a result of brain washing’ (Martins, 2011: 437), with very little or no agency. But some children have been known to voluntarily join military groups to avenge the killing of their families or friends by oppositional groups (Honwana, 2006: 29). When writing about the Liberian postcolonial war,

Sukanya Podder (2011: 57) provides a summary of some of the reasons that were given by children for joining the war, and these are:

- To bring back food and other material goods for the family
- Ethnic patriotism, that is, to defend their country
- Opportunity for a rise to prominence
- To gain economic freedom, as well as freedom from the control of adults.

Scott Gates (2011: 41) states that in a study that interviewed former child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Congo and Rwanda, fifteen per cent of the children interviewed said they had joined the armed groups mainly because they were fascinated by the military. In a study done by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda, ““volunteers” accounted for two-thirds of child soldiers interviewed’ (Brett & Specht, 2004: 1). Brett and Specht also point out that significant numbers of girls also volunteer to join wars, ‘even in situations where many girls are abducted, such as Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka’ (2004: 85). But, in considering these statements, it is important to note that the idea of volunteering or free choice is complicated by such push and pull factors as poverty and the need for protection. It is no coincidence that most of those who become child soldiers are usually ‘from the poor and disadvantaged sectors of society, from the conflict zones themselves, and from those with disrupted or nonexistent families’ (Brett & Specht, 2004: 3). In an interview, Germain, a child soldier from DRC states that they joined the war ‘because in the war, the civilians are maltreated. When you are a civilian in the war, it’s hard’ (in Brett & Specht, 2004: 13). Children may not have much choice on the matter because ‘war comes to them, rather than them going to look for a war to fight’ (Brett & Specht, 2004:10). But, although the

conditions of postcolonial wars blur the distinction between voluntary and forced recruitment, the decision to join the war can be read in terms of tactical agency, with children making certain choices within the limitations imposed on them by their circumstances.

Reasons for joining the war can also be gendered. In their research, Brett and Specht found that, for girls who volunteered to join the war, one of the main reasons often given was ‘domestic violence and exploitation at home (2004: 89). Some gender specific reasons given included the desire to assert their equality with boys and the need to use the gun as their means of protection from rape, abduction and other abuses (Brett & Specht, 2004).⁴³ Although there may be some commonalities, the specificities of the experiences of girls are not exactly the same as those of boys. In any case, these types of narrative are often ignored in favour of those driven by the humanist discourse in which the essential quality of child soldiers is their vulnerability; ‘they are dependent, exploited and powerless’ (Rosen & Rosen, 2012: 305). Even sexuality in films about child soldiers is often ‘clearly demarcated as rape and abuse rather than teenage promiscuity – the *bête noir* of the modern world’ – because sexual activity seems to challenge the idea of “childhood as innocence” (Taylor-Jones, 2016: 183). Girl soldiers are further silenced because most films maintain the status quo of patriarchal societies in which women and girls occupy the lowest ranks and have lesser control in defining their identities and owning their bodies.

Within such patriarchal structures, even boys do not fair too well because their age places them in a subordinate position to older males. When speaking about what inspired his film,

⁴³ Rape is also used as a weapon of war. Jonathan Zilberg notes that during the postcolonial war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, rape became ‘a calculated tactic so extreme in form and scale that it is hard for even seasoned relief workers to grasp’ (2010: 116).

the director of *War Witch*, Kim Nguyen, in an interview with Wilson Morales for Blackfilm.com (2012), says:

There's a story that came up out of the blue. There was this kid who was 9-years-old at the time, he would smoke cigars every day. He woke up one day and said he was the reincarnation of God. He guided an army of about 100 soldiers to fight against the soldiers of the government in Burma. Very egoistically, as a storyteller, I thought this has so much power and so much paradox; it was like a great tragedy in modern times. I felt compelled to tell a story about that...

It is interesting that *War Witch* was partly inspired by a story about a boy who led soldiers, and yet the narrative of child soldier as “leader,” which did not quite fit in with either the “single story” or the patriarchal hierarchy, was discarded in favour of the story of a girl who is abducted, forced to become a child soldier and raped. As Taylor-Jones argues, although rape and sexual violence are undoubtedly important, mainly focusing on these aspects obscures ‘the multiplicity of roles that girls and women play inside the war environment’ (2016: 185).

Nguyen, however, made the effort to represent child soldiers as faithfully as he could by conducting extensive research on the subject matter (Morales, 2012). But it should be noted that sometimes the testimonies of witnesses and victims are repackaged for the global stage, which means they may not necessarily be reproduced faithfully due to being formatted to suit certain narratives (Edmondson, 2005: 455). Filmmakers and journalists have also been known to request ‘to talk to ... children with “more traumatic” stories’ when they approach humanitarian organisations (Machel in Denov, 2010: 8). But it is also possible that

filmmakers are caught up in a web of complex relationships where all those involved are trying to manipulate the narratives to their own benefit or to support their own ideas. For instance, Susan Shepler notes that child soldiers use a ‘variety of strategically adopted identities’ (2005: 199). When they are ‘among their friends and fellow soldiers, they try to maintain the status that being part of the fighting gives them’ (Shepler, 2005: 198-199). But, with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), ‘they adopt the persona of the traumatized innocent, usually requesting aid in furthering their education’ (ibid.: 199). And ‘with community members and in school, they act like normal kids, never mentioning the past’ (ibid.). It is then possible that when filmmakers do their research and speak to former child soldiers, the children may tell them what they think the filmmakers want to hear. Former child soldiers ‘exercise agency, paradoxically, through their claims of wartime *non-agency*’ (Shepler, 2005: 200). For example, in *Grace, Milly, Lucy...Child Soldiers*, when Milly pushes Lucy to accept responsibility for physically and emotionally abusing her during their time as child soldiers, Lucy keeps insisting that it was not her fault, she had to do it. But Milly implies that some of the things Lucy did were not because she was forced when she says that Lucy ‘used to abuse the abductees even though [their] husband didn’t approve.’⁴⁴

Sarah Oyero, another former child soldier in *Grace, Milly, Lucy...Child Soldiers*, also implies that some elements of jealousy may have played a part in Lucy’s behaviour towards Milly because their husband apparently loved Milly more. The idea of coerced action is therefore complicated because there may be other indirect forces at play. Lucy mentions that she had to make sure that recruits did not escape, or she would have been killed, but she also implies that if you were good at your job, like she was, you got promoted, which obviously meant less suffering. Özerdem and Podder state that ‘girl soldiers, especially former commanders,

⁴⁴ Milly and Lucy were co-wives.

have been noted for their military skills, and for tactical agency in striking alliances, liaisons and often performing the role of recruiters themselves for regional mercenary groups' (2011: 11). Lucy may have been playing the "zero-sum game" as her means of survival because a promotion meant better conditions for her.⁴⁵ She may indeed be what Erin K. Baines refers to as a 'complex political perpetrator,' occupying the 'ambiguous status as victim and perpetrator (2009: 164).⁴⁶ But Lucy clearly realises that she now has to use a different approach to survive since she is no longer a child soldier as she says to Milly, 'some things from the past should remain in the past, let's not bring them up right now.'

It becomes difficult to come up with alternative representations when some of the child soldiers "play the system" by adopting a humanitarian discourse which they know might benefit them materially or by easing their reintegration into society. For the child soldier committing atrocities such as 'murder and rape, the narrative of these events usually takes the form of "they made me do it"' (Harrow, 2013: 2). Conditions of humanitarian aid have the potential to influence the identities that former child soldiers are willing to claim. For instance, in the Sierra Leonean postcolonial war, 'the humanitarian effort to aid the victims excluded aid to those judged to be supporting the [Revolutionary United Front (RUF)]' (Harrow, 2013: 8). Having witnessed such discrimination, children may be motivated to lie about the details of their involvement in the war. Even in documentaries, children may

⁴⁵ The zero-sum game can be defined as 'a situation in which one person or group can win something only by causing another person or group to lose it' (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2017).

⁴⁶ Baines uses the term 'complex political perpetrators' to 'describe a generation of victims in settings of chronic crisis who not only adapt to violence to survive, but thrive' (2009: 180).

exhibit themselves instead of unwittingly revealing themselves because they know they shall be watched (Turner, 2009: 150).⁴⁷

Sukanya Podder's experience with child soldiers is that on a first meeting they 'admit to being forced, but with familiarity tend to shift their story to one of opportunism and volition' (2011: 60). This could reflect that former child soldiers may provide alternative stories once they have had time to figure out the purpose of the research. For instance, if the research is not linked to forms of aid to war victims, child soldiers may offer stories outside of the humanitarian discourse. It is possible that researching child soldiers may require extended contact with the child soldiers, which demands a large amount of time that filmmakers may not necessarily have. But Sauvage, who directed *Johnny Mad Dog* (2008) which uses the dominant stereotypical images of the child soldier, spent a year with former child soldiers who acted in his film (Utas, 2011: 213). This suggests that extended contact may not necessarily result in more nuanced representations.

In some cases, it is not necessarily that the children try to intentionally deceive researchers for their own selfish reasons. Memory is inevitably not a process of remembering things as they were. As Hutton argues, it is a process 'not of retrieval but of reconfiguration [that] colonises the past by obliging it to conform to present configurations' (Hutton, 1988, in Zelizer, 1995: 217). When referring to Ishmael Beah's memoir, in which the author narrates his experiences as a child soldier, Kenneth Harrow argues that his 'story of being lost in the woods for a month ... was subject to the distortions of time ... and of trauma whose violence is transferred, reconstituted, reimagined as it should have been, in order that he could work

⁴⁷ Turner explores the idea of performing for the camera in relation to film actors, but this can also be applied to child soldiers because they are aware that those who "collect" their stories collect them for an audience.

through the trauma and its afterwork of forgetting' (2013: 2). Another example that shows that memory is influenced by its usefulness to the present is the different ways in which Milly and Lucy in *Grace, Milly, Lucy...Child Soldiers* remember Lucy's behaviour as a child soldier. Lucy may indeed only remember herself as a victim just like every other child soldier, whereas Milly sees some of the abuses Lucy perpetrated as going beyond what was required of her. The unstable nature of memory could also explain why, as Honwana states, 'children frequently change their narratives' (2006: 14).

But, even with detailed and accurate descriptions from child soldiers, filmmakers can never fully grasp what it means to be a child soldier. They remain outsiders to the experiences of child soldiers, and this complicates their task of putting the child soldiers' emotions and subjectivities on screen. Nguyen partly handles this "unrepresentable" aspect by using ghosts to reflect 'the state of mind of [the] children' (Nguyen in an interview with Anne-Christine Loranger, 2012). But the ghosts can only allude to; they do not show the children's psychological frame of mind. But, unlike films such as *Blood Diamond* and *Johnny Mad Dog*, Nguyen attempts to put the viewer into Komona's shoes by telling the story from her perspective. However, even in these cases a disjuncture may still exist between representations and experiences. For instance, fictional films often miss the interpersonal power dynamics amongst the child soldiers, such as those reflected in the relationship between Milly and Lucy in *Grace, Milly, Lucy...Child Soldiers*. A good understanding of these interpersonal power dynamics amongst child soldiers may result in the provision of a more nuanced representation of their tactical agency.

It is important to explore the various elements that influence the representations of girl soldiers because these representations influence the way the African girl-child is imagined.

Myriam Denov suggests that although child soldiers are ‘frequently constructed through the logic of extremes (as either extreme victims, extreme perpetrators or extreme heroes), in reality, the lives, experiences and identities of these children fall within the messy, ambiguous and paradoxical zones of all three’ (2010: 2). Exploring these grey areas in filmic representations often results in a move from the use of dominant stereotypes to representing characters that are more complex. But, as Stuart Hall argues, ‘meanings are inevitably implicated in relations of power’ (1997: 8). Thus, even in representations of more complex characters, the dominant ideologies still filter in.

Conclusion

Despite the complex experiences of girls during political conflicts, there seems to be a binary representation of girls who participate in these conflicts. These representations are linked to how the identities of both women and children are perceived, and how the wars are framed. In justified wars, such as the anti-colonial wars, girls become heroes, whereas in unjustified wars they become helpless victims. This indicates that representations of girls who participate in African political conflicts are, to an extent, used to express moral judgments on the conflicts rather than explore the experiences of the girls. Girls make for a stronger argument when making moral judgments about wars because they are both female and children, categories that are stereotyped as the ones that the adult male should protect. In anti-colonial wars, girls become an indication of the strength of the injustice felt by their people, an injustice that compels them to come out of protection and join the adult males in the fight for justice. But in postcolonial wars, rather than “join” the war, girls are represented as being “used” by the male adult as weapons of war, and also as helpless to fight such abuse. The helpless girls become “evidence” of a doomed society. As such, these representations become another means for expressing afro-pessimistic ideas.

Feminist studies have largely focused on the experiences of women, and therefore it is not clear how girls fit into the picture. But the timing of *Sarafina!* and *Flame* coincide with the birth of what Gwendolyn Mikell (1995) considers a politically conscious feminism in Africa. By shifting attention to the younger female, the films represent feminist ideas as progress from the traditional ideas of the older women. Therefore, feminist ideas become a product of a modernity that the older women are not part of. Feminism becomes something that the younger female is exposed to rather than arising from the contradictions of women's experiences.

Limiting feminist ideas to the younger female also gives the impression that the actions of the girl are just a detour from her path to the more acceptable forms of womanhood. Thus, the representations of girls become expressions of the flexible relationship between women and the nation. It does not really challenge the patriarchal structure. In this regard, it becomes significant that most of the films that represent these girls are made by men.

The high cost and technical skills that filmmaking demands have resulted in girls' dependency on adults for representation. It is often adult males who have access to these necessary resources, and therefore the girls are usually represented from a male perspective rather than female. However, it should be noted that even the girls who were or are involved in political conflicts have been known to distort their own experiences in order to serve their interests. Both the filmmakers and the girls are therefore caught in a system that inhibits certain forms of expressions.

In the four films under analysis, the main characters are never just heroines or victims or survivors, they are usually a combination of at least two of those characteristics. As a result, some of the ideological influences are not always so obvious. The next chapters will explore how some patriarchal as well as afro-pessimistic ideas are hidden within some of the “complex” characterisations of the girl soldiers. The first film that will be analysed is *Sarafina!*.

Chapter Three

Sarafina!: The Girl as a Tool for Nation Building

Introduction

Freedom is just the beginning. Think bigger, like your idea for the school play.

The prison door opens. The prisoner walks free. What then?

Mary Masambuka in *Sarafina!*, 1992

Darrell Roodt's *Sarafina!* (1992) demonstrates a level of sensitivity that South Africa's highly unstable and violent political environment of the early 1990s demanded. The film was released during the interregnum period between the unbanning of political organisations in South Africa in 1990, and the first democratic elections in 1994. The film's subject matter, the youth uprising of the 1970s and 1980s, deals with a time when a significant proportion of young people saw violence as a necessary evil in the struggle against apartheid, although not necessarily the preferred option. On the other hand, the film was released at a time when the dominant African nationalist discourse was now framing violence as a hindrance to political negotiations that aimed at establishing a democratic South Africa. As such, it can be said that the tension between the desire to represent the violent past more truthfully and the need to avoid fuelling the violence of the present could not be avoided. The film's early viewers existed in the "what then" moment that Sarafina's teacher in the film, Mary Masambuka, speaks of in the above statement.⁴⁸ Significantly, for this study, this "what then" moment

⁴⁸ Sarafina is the title character of the film.

coincides with the return of the “fathers” from prison.⁴⁹ The moment, therefore, has considerable implications for girls, who, together with the boys, had to step in and make sure the struggle continued in the absence of the fathers, or because they felt the adults were not doing enough. Thus, through the girl, Sarafina, the film allows for an exploration of the representations of the “place” of girls both within the nationalist struggle and after the struggle has been won. This chapter argues that *Sarafina!*, rather than explore the multiple voices and subject positions of girls during the youth uprising, uses “the girl” symbolically to express the nation building values of the now returned fathers.

When speaking of the film, which is based on Mbongeni Ngema’s play of the same title,⁵⁰ Nelson Mandela is reported to have said the film ‘is not only a reminder of the past but a challenge for the future’ (Kraft, 1992).⁵¹ Indeed, the film vacillates between glorifying the militant youth and taming them. And it operates within a framework of conciliation. According to Hermann Giliomee and Lawrence Schlemmer, such a framework ‘must have particular features facilitating conflict resolution, and it must contain principles of a general nature capable of addressing the major needs and interests within a very wide spectrum of mobilised political groups’ (1989: 206). The desire to address a wide spectrum of the South African population may be seen, for example, in the removal from the film of Shaka Zulu and Cetshwayo, who are mentioned in Ngema’s play. Albie Sachs explains the controversial nature of historical figures such as Shaka Zulu and Cetshwayo by saying that they can be

⁴⁹ This term is used in reference to the structure of a patriarchal order.

⁵⁰ Ngema’s play was written and performed during the apartheid period of the mid to late 1980s.

⁵¹ Nelson Mandela was the leader of the African National Congress (ANC) at the time and went on to become the first president of democratic South Africa in 1994.

‘used on the one hand to inspire people to fight selflessly for an all-embracing liberation of our country, and on the other hand to cultivate a sanguinary tribal chauvinism’ (1998: 245).

In its bid to speak to a wider spectrum of viewers, the film also uses a language that appeals to both local and international audiences. Alexander Johnston notes that ‘casual reification of “the people” and its elision with “African,”’ was much more popular within the African context, whereas ‘the non-racialism of the Freedom Charter’⁵² worked better for the ‘wider world of diplomacy and global politic public relations’ (2014: 74). In *Sarafina!* there is constant reference to “the people,” but, at the same time, the ideals of non-racialism are also expressed. For instance, when speaking about her prison experience Sarafina says:

And what was their lesson? To torture and kill? To hate them more than they hate us? I don’t want to be like them. I had a wonderful teacher ... I want to be like her. She knew there had to be a better way.

This statement emphasises the desire to end the cycle of hate by rejecting the idea of fighting racism with racism. This is despite the fact that, in the historical uprising, the youth ‘had been inspired by the vision of African national liberation in which a majority is defined racially and not in a civic, race-blind, ahistoric, shifting way...’ (Johnston, 2014: 105).

Many of the changes made to Ngema’s play may be explained by the desire to appeal to the international audience. For instance, in the play, a preacher says at a funeral: ‘America and Britain have sold too many guns to the South African government to kill our children’

⁵² Non-racialism is clearly expressed in the Freedom Charter through the statement: ‘We the people of South Africa, black and white, together equals, countrymen and brothers adopt this Freedom Charter’ – (Freedom Charter, 1955).

(Ngema, 2005: 67), but this statement, which implicates America and Britain in the apartheid government's violence, is eliminated from the film. Roodt states that 'with the advantage of hindsight, it's the same story – but completely different' (Roodt in Dutka, 1992a). The filmmakers were very much aware of their film's production context, and considered this context in their adaptation of the play. Thomas Leitch notes that a film can 'depart from its literary source because of new cultural or historical contexts it addresses' (2008: 66). Considerations of the similarities and differences between the play and the film are very important for a greater understanding of the ideologies that influence the representation of the girl, Sarafina, in the film.

Production and Consumption Contexts

The Play, the Late 1980s and the Film

Just like the play, the film adopts a more simplified version of the youth uprising. Bundy explains the complex character of the youth uprising saying that the 'youth politics could pass from intensity to zealotry. "People's courts" dominated by youngsters veered from justice to vengeance; stay-aways and boycotts were sometimes enforced by intimidation' (1994: 48-49). Maingard also notes that some 'schools were divided on ethnic lines' (1997: 17). And yet the film, just like the play, makes the point that the scholars voluntarily came together as one unified body. However, as mentioned earlier, there are some notable differences between the play and the film. These differences can be partly explained by the shifts in the political environment. Ngema's play was 'first performed at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg in 1986' (Ngema, 2005: 33), and therefore, unlike the film, both its setting and production context falls within the apartheid era.

Ngema says he conceived the play after ‘an interesting conversation with Winnie Mandela,’ in which they spoke about the ‘fearlessness and courage’ of the youth who faced the South African Defence Force ‘with nothing but stones and the accompaniment of song and dance’ (Ngema, 2005: 33). This statement centres the play squarely within the nationalist struggle, making it part of the struggle rather than a mere “representation of.” The play’s nationalist perspective becomes apparent when it is compared to the documentary *Suffer the Children* by the British director, Nicholas Claxton, which came out in 1987. The documentary focuses on how, under apartheid, children, some as young as eight, were harassed, tortured and detained. While the documentary details the brutalities of the apartheid rule, which places it on the side of the African nationalists, it represents children as innocence victims rather than as playing an active role in the struggle. The children in the documentary claim to have been arrested and detained despite having had nothing to do with the crimes they were accused of. The documentary very much takes the humanitarian perspective that is associated with the “outsider’s view” of African children. Martin Botha notes that during the 1970s and 1980s, many documentaries about South Africa were made with the view to ‘educate an international audience on the horrors of apartheid,’ and get their ‘support for the anti-apartheid movement’ (2016: 59). This can be contrasted to Nadine Angel Cloete’s *Action Kommandant* (2016), released twenty-two years after the first democratic elections, in which children of the 1980s, including girls, are represented as political actors rather than victims.⁵³ However, when *Suffer the Children* is viewed in relation to Ngema’s *Sarafina!*, it becomes clear that both perspectives have agendas that are not necessarily aligned with exploring the varied experiences of children during this period. This is because they take the view of

⁵³ *Action Kommandant* documents the life and death of South African liberation fighter, Ashley Kriel, who ‘was known as the Ché Guevara of Cape Town’s notorious “Cape Flats”’, and is considered ‘the symbol of 1980s youth resistance’ (Ma’engere Film Productions, 2017).

children as either heroes or victims, without exploring much of the children's complex experiences.

Additionally, because *Suffer the Children* focuses on children much younger than Sarafina, it raises the question of whether Sarafina should be regarded as a child in the same way that the children in the documentary are. The play does not give much social context to complicate the definition of a child, but emphasises the fact that Sarafina is still in school and therefore still dependent on adults for her wellbeing. When discussing the 1976 youth uprising, Hjalte Tin notes that 'the children were variously called children, youths, pupils, or students' (2001: 137). Tin decides to call them children because they were pupils 'from schools and high schools ... [who] still lived at home' (ibid.). This idea of Sarafina as a school child is carried over into the film. In the film, the pupils are also constantly described as children by the police and other adults. When many of the young people are arrested, one of them speaks directly to the camera saying, 'we are still children,' thus indicating that even the young people consider themselves children. But Roodt complicates a simple definition of childhood by making Sarafina responsible for the well-being of her younger siblings while her mother is away at work. Thus, the definition of childhood in the film becomes more socially defined than universal. Sarafina's situation at home forces her to take on a more adult role, and yet, when she puts on her uniform, she becomes a child once again. However, her home situation places her within the stereotypical representation of women as caregivers or mothers. As a result, Sarafina's representation in the film as a girl is very much linked to the representation of women.

It is not clear how much of the play was influenced by Winnie Mandela's input, but Jeanne Colleran claims that the play was 'plotless, until [she] suggested it celebrate the resilience

and commitment of South African children' (1998: 232). In a report on *Sarafina!* the film in *The Morning Call*, Myra Yellin Goldfarb confidently states that 'Ngema used Winnie as a model for his character of Sarafina' (1992). Ngema is quoted to have said 'Winnie became a fighter and learned to defy the law years ago and has never bowed her head to nobody' (ibid.). Ngema's statement gives the image of Winnie Mandela as a militant woman, a characteristic that can be linked to the play's Sarafina. On the other hand, in a more recent publication of the play, Ngema (2005: 33) only goes as far as saying, 'Winnie said something profound. She said, "I wish I had a big blanket to cover the faces of the little ones so they can never see the bitter end."' This last statement shifts the image of Winnie Mandela from the militant woman to a "motherly" figure. We also see a similar shift in the film from the mainly militant role of the girl in the play to the incorporation of the significance of motherhood and women's more nurturing roles. These shifts demonstrate that the way history is remembered is often influenced by the conditions of the present.⁵⁴

Ngema's play in the 1980s may have needed the image of Winnie Mandela as a militant woman to authenticate the idea of having a girl at the centre of the story about the youth uprising. Tanya Lyons speaks of how after the declaration of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985), it was no longer enough to represent women as just playing "supportive roles" for men (2004: 168).⁵⁵ The image of the "militant" woman participating in nationalist struggles became a strong marketing point for gaining international support (ibid.). Ngema's play can be seen as having been influenced by this context, but also by the fact that Winnie Mandela was one of the most popular South African political activists. Jared Mobarak

⁵⁴ See Chapters One and Two for an exploration of the relationship between history and memory.

⁵⁵ Lyons refers specifically to the Zimbabwean situation. But seeing the global nature of the Decade for Women, its ideological influences may be applied to other nationalist struggles.

describes her as ‘the on-the-ground leader of the African National Congress (ANC)’ at a time when Nelson Mandela and other political activists were in prison (2017).

Winnie Mandela, famously known for her contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle, had also been linked to the youth uprising. *South African History Online* explains how Winnie Mandela was held in police custody for five months after being accused of ‘inciting the violence’ of the 1976 youth uprising (2011). However, *South African History Online* gives the impression that Winnie Mandela was only arrested because the police needed a ‘scapegoat,’ and ‘[she] fit the bill’ (2011). They argue that she could not have been responsible because, ‘regardless of how influential she might have been, Winnie’s influence alone could never explain the levels of anger amongst South Africa’s youth at that time’ (ibid.). While this 2011 view of Winnie Mandela’s role in the youth uprising may be valid, it also raises questions regarding post-apartheid South Africa’s acknowledgement of women’s roles during the anti-apartheid struggle. In a review of Lamche’s film, *Winnie* (2017), Kwanele Sosibo implies that the vilification of Winnie Mandela in the 1990s exposes the ‘patriarchal underpinnings’ of post-apartheid South Africa (2017). Whatever the case may be, the play can be seen as influenced by the realities, the politics and the feminist impulses of its time.

The film came at a time when many socio-political factors had shifted. In addition to the political environment, there had been a shift in the feminist representations of the relationship between women and nationhood, which can be explained by the “rebirth” of feminism that Gwendolyn Mikell (1995) observes in Africa in the 1990s.⁵⁶ In the 1990s, motherhood became an important aspect to African feminism or womanhood (Mikell, 1995: 412). In the

⁵⁶ See Chapter Two.

film, Sarafina becomes more nurturing than militant. However, it is not just a shift in feminist politics that influences the representations in the film. In fact, it can be argued that the film is dominated by patriarchal rather than feminist views.

When referring to the play on which the film was based, Mbongeni Ngema, the writer, says that it 'was a salute to the heroines of the struggle such as Lilian Ngoye, Fatima Meer, Winnie Mandela and all the women of South Africa who had committed their lives to the fight for freedom' (Mbongeni Ngema in Guldemann, 1996: 85). But, despite so many women to choose from, the person that Sarafina reveres in the film is a man, Nelson Mandela. The choice of Nelson Mandela as Sarafina's main role model may be well justified by his popularity and his immeasurable contribution to South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle, but, to an extent, it shifts the focus from the day-to-day struggles and achievements of ordinary South African women and girls. This is especially so because by 1992, Mandela was not only considered a great politician; he was also a celebrity figure, a status that took him out of the realm of the ordinary into the realm of the unique and extraordinary. The film also uses stereotypes that betray its patriarchal definition of womanhood. Jacqueline Maingard suggests that 'although Sarafina is female, the film still privileges black male experience and a male gaze' (1994: 240). In support of her argument, Maingard cites the fact that Sarafina 'is not involved with her male friends in burning schools and urging the boycott of white businesses; rather she is the object of Crocodile's romantic desires' (ibid.). She also suggests that Sarafina's 'desperation to be a star,' and 'the camera's objectification of her face' through close-ups, confirms 'her beauty and desirability' (ibid.). Sarafina's heroism is therefore defined, to an extent, within a patriarchal context. And, as shall be discussed later, Winnie Mandela's "fall from grace" may have contributed to the shift in the representation of Sarafina.

Other than the issue of gender representation, it is also important to consider the relationship between the children and the adults. The play emphasises that even though Sarafina acts on her own, she is shaped by the adult women who form part of her community. In that way, the conflict in the play is centred around racial issues and not generational. However, Hjalte Tin argues that during apartheid ‘the structure of rule pitted children against adults,’ and so there were elements of generational conflict (2001: 129). Tin suggests that children confronted the state ‘as *minors* when the state ruled the house through the fathers. ... as *pupils* in the schools,’ when they dealt ‘with the state rule implemented by the teacher,’ and ‘as *blacks* at the frontiers of the ethnic-racial space,’ as they faced the South African security forces who enforced ethnic segregation (2001: 128-129). Tin goes on to give examples of actions by the youth which clearly put them in direct confrontation with the adults, such as enforcing stayaways and closing *shebeens* (ibid.: 134-135).⁵⁷ The Minister of Justice, Jimmy Kruger, even sought to deal with the youth by giving ‘black vigilante groups of older males ... legal recognition by the police’ (ibid.: 135). Alexander Johnston also argues that the ‘1976 uprising and its aftermath in the townships had been such a forceful statement of generational self-assertion by the young’ (2014: 105). From these observations, it becomes clear that there was certainly a complex relationship between the children and the adults, although it is not clear how gender fits in within these confrontations.

Roodt’s film hints at these generational tensions, but, most importantly, gives them a gendered dimension. The generational conflict is between the mothers and their children, and pupils and teachers, as well as the children and the police, but not the fathers. In fact, Sarafina announces to her mother that she would rather be a dead hero like her father than live like her

⁵⁷ *Shebeens* are small informal black owned bars.

mother, making the father more a symbol of nationalism than the mother. In another scene, the boys confront some women, whom they refer to as mothers, and tear up their groceries because they insist on buying in white-owned shops after the youth declare a boycott. In the same incident, one of the boys states that they are forced to act because both their mothers and fathers are doing nothing. But, although the fathers are also implicated in this statement, without the visualisation of any direct conflict between them and the children, they are able to maintain some level of respect. The film also ensures the fathers are not completely undermined because the scene of the boys fighting with the mothers is intercut with the scene of Sarafina sitting in a train on her way to visit her mother. While Sarafina is on the train, we hear her voice-over “confiding” in Nelson Mandela about her feelings of alienation whenever she visits her mother’s workplace.⁵⁸ Even in his absence, the father figure is able to provide a form of emotional support to the troubled girl. It becomes significant that it is during this same visit that Sarafina fights with her mother and accuses her of being a coward. When the father is present, as is the case with one of the boys, Guitar, there is also a strong emotional connection as demonstrated by Guitar’s betrayal of his friends in order to protect his father. This incident, instead of making the father figure a coward, highlights the fact that Guitar’s father is incapable of fighting not because he is a coward, but because he cannot walk.

In addition to all these factors, there is also a need to consider the commercial aspect of the production and distribution context. Jeanne Colleran (1998) argues that the play was driven more by commercial impulses than political activism. Where Ngema (2005) sees music as very much part of South Africans’ protest activities, Colleran states that in theatre circles, ‘the black South African musical has long been recognised as primarily a for-profit

⁵⁸ Sarafina’s mother works as a maid for a white family.

entertainment' (1998: 229).⁵⁹ This is partly because there was a lot of money to be made in such musicals, but the cast was still paid very little. Colleran sees the black musical theatre as reproducing 'the same inequitable economic relations that the rest of industry under apartheid did' (ibid.). Colleran also notes that the Lincoln Centre Theatre's Gregory Mosher and Bernard Gerstein offered to produce *Sarafina!* before Ngema had even written the play (1998: 131).⁶⁰ This ties into her argument that the play relies on a formula meant to ensure overseas success, which turns the play 'into a political spectacle.' Roodt carries over the play's musical genre into the film adaptation.

The Genre and the Film

The fact that the film also adapts the musical genre is very significant for the interpretation of the film. The success of the musical play may have worked in the film's favour when trying to raise production and distribution funds. The film also adapts some of the theatrical aspects of the play, which leads Maingard to describe it as presenting 'a pastiche of theatrical, musical, and music video elements' (1994: 240). However, this choice was not as well received by some critics. In 1992, one reviewer, Marjorie Baumgarten, of *The Austin Chronicle*, had this to say about the film:

The world of the musical is a world characterized by artifice. ... By placing the very real struggle for human rights within the musical's borders, it threatens to

⁵⁹ Colleran's idea implies the need to differentiate between the use of music during protests, as happens in a film like *Mapantsula* (Schmitz, 1988), which cannot be classified as a musical, and "the musical" as a genre.

⁶⁰ The Lincoln Centre Theatre in New York City, United States of America.

denature the strife and torture and present them as wholly artificial constructs.

This is Sarafina's irreconcilable conflict.

In an extreme case, Thabiso Leshoai, a critic for *The Sowetan*,⁶¹ thought that putting the student uprising into 'some Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers type format' was 'in-your-face offensive' (in Keller, 1993). But some reviewers did not see the choice of genre as undermining the elements of realism in the film. Michael Wilmington of the *Los Angeles Times* stated that the film 'mix[es] musical fantasy with a reality so raw, your eyes sting while watching it' (1992). And Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* (1992) saw the choice of genre as displaying Roodt's mastery as a filmmaker:

... a tougher, more realistic "Sarafina!" means a film at war with itself, as it tries to reconcile "Fame"-style high spirits with the misery of its characters' lives. It's no small accomplishment on the part of Darrell James Roodt, ... that "Sarafina!" remains a forceful mixture of celebration and fury much of the way through.

What is significant about all these comments is that the critics were concerned about the film's relationship with "reality," although it is not clear "whose" reality. Even though the film is based on a fictional play, its representations are treated as some form of "cultural memory." This demonstrates a complex relationship between personal memories and cultural memories, in which the fictional film is considered a means for preserving people's 'memory of an event' (Sturken, 2008: 74). As such, the film's representation of the role of girls in political conflicts becomes significant because it is now part of cultural memory.

⁶¹ One of South Africa's largest black newspaper.

The critics also express views that reflect ‘concerns about how popular culture and mass media can co-opt memories and reconfigure histories in the name of entertainment’ (Sturken, 2008: 75). Whether these concerns are valid or not, as Maingard argues, the ‘reading of the film is underlined by its style’ (1994: 240). The choice of genre plays a significant role in presenting Sarafina’s relationship to the nation. For instance, as shall be discussed later, it can be said that some of her “theatrical” performances highlight the impermanence of her struggle-defined sense of citizenship.

The representation of the girl in Roodt’s film does not necessarily give a “voice” to girls who participated in the struggle. But it is not so much because of the genre that the filmmaker chooses to use. Rather, it is because of the themes embedded in the film’s narrative and structure. To a greater extent, the film uses the girl to present certain ideas about the nation and nationhood that are linked to the film’s production context. Next is an exploration of the film’s production context.

The Film and Hollywood

Major Hollywood studios only got interested in the film after Anant Singh, the film’s producer, managed to sign up the Hollywood star, Whoopi Goldberg, to play the role of Sarafina’s teacher (Dutka, 1992a). Signing up a Hollywood actress instead of a South African one can therefore be seen as a strategic move aimed at attracting Hollywood funding. But the move may also have come at a cost. Colleran notes that the portrayal that Whoopi Goldberg offers, and ‘the movie’s mixture of rousing music and little plot is virtually identical to Goldberg’s other “inspiring” films about saving young black children: *Sister Act I* and *Sister Act II*’ (1998: 232). The question now is whether it was just a matter of perfectly coinciding interests, or whether the filmmakers had to make concessions, or create the part with the aim

of making it attractive to the star. In any case, with the signing up of Goldberg, Miramax Pictures got involved, and later on, in 1992, the Walt Disney Company offered to distribute the film after its Cannes Festival success (*ibid.*).⁶²

However, it seems signing up Whoopi Goldberg was not enough for the funders; they also wanted the story to be told in a certain way. For instance, Roger Ebert (1992) states that there was more than one version of the film, and its co-distributors, Miramax Pictures and Hollywood Pictures, ‘had disagreements about the various versions.’ Ebert also states that the distributors had an issue with the film because it did not have a ‘clear moral position on the murder’ committed by its heroes (*ibid.*). This nature of involvement by the distributors implies the possibility that some adjustments may have been made to the film to meet their requirements.

Despite Hollywood’s initial rejection, the fact that the filmmakers approached Hollywood studios implies that the film was constructed as a commercial venture. Jeanne Colleran suggests that the play’s ‘narrative of the young school girl’s political awakening via the efforts of her energetic, committed schoolmistress is sufficiently reductive that it easily became a Hollywood movie’ (1998: 232). Additionally, Maingard argues that ‘[the film] uses the South African context in what is essentially a commercial venture’ (1994: 242-243). How all this influenced the representation of Sarafina in specific terms remains speculative. There are, however, some recognisable differences between the teacher in the play and in the film, as well as differences in the relationship between these two teachers and Sarafina. One of the differences is that in the film the teacher is arrested and martyred. And, as shall be discussed

⁶² The Walt Disney Studios used its film production label Hollywood Pictures.

in a later section, the teacher's arrest and death seems to have a significant impact on the path that Sarafina takes. Next is a closer look at the film and its consumption context.

The Film and the Early 1990s

Roodt's *Sarafina!* was released at a time when 'the very concept of "nation," even at the most fundamental geographical level, [was] powerfully contested' (Maingard, 1994: 242). This created a situation in which some forms of youth revolt were no longer as clearly defined as "nationalist" in the same way they were in the pre-1990 period. In many ways, the youth in the early 1990s were caught up in a situation that was beyond their control. Alexander Johnston notes that during this period 'ethnic separatism ... for the first time, revealed itself as a threat' (2014: 101). This separatism could be seen in the 'neo-partitionist stance of the Afrikaner nationalist rump, the CP [Conservative Party] and the paramilitary AWB [Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging],' as well as the transformation of Inkatha into Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) (ibid.). Divisions were not just ethnic. Donald L. Horowitz notes that the sometimes sporadic 'violence between Africanists and Charterists' had accelerated in 1990 (1991: 72).⁶³ Political violence had taken 'a number of tangled and intractable forms between various antagonists with a range of motives,' and it was mostly between impoverished working-class Africans (Bundy, 1994: 57). In extreme cases, people were killed for wearing 'the wrong colour T-shirt or walk[ing] on the wrong side of a boundary road' (ibid.). School children were not spared the violence. In some schools, teachers and administrators were reported, even in the "black media," to have lost control of, or rather to, the students (ibid.: 59). Additionally, some die-hard apartheid security and intelligence officers who had 'an

⁶³ Charterists were those groups, mainly the African National Congress (ANC), that supported the principle of non-racialism espoused in the Freedom Charter adopted by the ANC in 1955. The Africanists were those groups such as the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) that held pro-African views and 'rejected a role for whites in the political solution' (de Villiers, 2005: 16).

intrinsic interest in internecine black violence’ also threw in their efforts into the mix (ibid.: 57).

Jacqueline Maingard describes South Africa’s transitional period as characterised by ‘debilitating and destructive’ violence (1994: 239). The fact that political leaders were engaged in negotiation processes led to a hegemonic perception that this violence was not necessary, and therefore needed to be controlled in order to ensure the continuation of the negotiations. Alexander Johnston notes that ‘the negotiations were grounded in fear of anarchy...’ (2014: 107). Within this context, rather than continuing to uncritically glorify young people as heroes, analytical attention on the youth was shifting ‘to different aspects of a multi-faceted “youth crisis”’ (Bundy, 1994: 49). Within this discourse, ‘members of “the youth” [were] variously portrayed as the victims or vectors of that crisis,’ and there was ‘growing awareness of the desperate state of black schooling, steeping rates of unemployment and crime, disintegrating family structures, and the threat of AIDS’ (ibid.). In developmental terms, the welfare of young people could not be ignored because, as Colin Bundy points out, in South Africa in 1990, ‘fully two-thirds of the African population were twenty-seven or younger’ (1994: 51). This demographic reality made the fate of the youth that much more important. To an extent, *Sarafina!* can be seen as attempting to contribute to the shaping of the youth culture through its representation of Sarafina which sees the girl, in many significant moments, performing the role of the voice of reason that tames the rather violent impulse of the boys. The film represents the impulse for violence as gendered, with boys being the perpetrators of many of the violent acts.

Focusing on the past enables *Sarafina!* to put an emphasis on the “liberatory” youth stereotype of the 1970s and 1980s uprising, and avoid dealing with the “apocalyptic”

stereotype of the youth that was gaining some momentum.⁶⁴ In this regard, the representation of youth in *Sarafina!* can also be seen as an attempt to recoup the image of the youth by reminding people of a time when the youth were “rebels with a cause.” The image of the “youth as heroes” serves to counter the negative stereotype that was growing in a time when the line between “justified” and “indiscriminate” violence was largely unclear. The film has even been described as ‘unabashedly propagandistic on behalf of its young black heroes’ (Johnson, 1992).

The film also worked to remind the youth and the rest of South Africa that now the “cause” needed to be nation building. Roodt observed that ‘though [the] project is still confrontational and angry, it’s told with more hope and a spirit of reconciliation’ (Roodt in Dutka, 1992a). It becomes significant that although Sarafina may not unequivocally oppose violence, she does not believe in indiscriminate violence and violence of the extreme kind, that is, the act of killing. On many occasions, she expresses the idea that the end of apartheid should bring an end to killing. In her Mandela speech at the end of the film, she says, ‘The day is coming, when we will all be free. Free from hatred, free from fear, free from killing. You are young. You’ll live to see the day.’ Guldemann suggests that the celebratory scene at the end of the film ‘is perhaps, at one level, an imaginary resolution and response to the fact that when this film was made, Mandela was free, but violence, and particularly racial and ethnic violence, was rife’ (1996: 96). In this sense, the scene can be seen as an appeal to stop the violence by

⁶⁴ According to Colin Bundy (1994: 50), Jeremy Seekings dubbed the two main constructions of South African youth at the time “liberatory” and “apocalyptic”. “Liberatory” youth ‘refers to militant, politically active young people,’ and this stereotype assumes ‘implicitly or explicitly, that the majority of young people evinced similar political characteristics’ (ibid.). The “apocalyptic” youth stereotype characterises ‘young blacks as undisciplined, destructive and dangerous’ (ibid.). As Bundy notes, these terms are both ideological. Whereas ‘the former defines youth according to a set of positive political characteristics; the latter essentially views youth as the vector of a compendium of social ills and anxieties’ (ibid.).

emphasising “what can be” rather than “what is.” Sarafina, performing as Mandela, becomes the go-between who communicates the desires of the fathers to their sons and daughters. The girl is able to provide the stereotypical female role of working to keep or bring the “family” together by mediating between the fathers and their children. But a feminist reading is undermined by the fact that the words are presented as those of Mandela, not Sarafina.

To a greater extent, being set in the past also allows the film to focus on reconciliation without exploring the causes of the continuing violence in the early 1990s. Schechter, who was at the time vice president of Globalvision, noted that ‘some people found the film a bit simplistic and outdated’ because ‘the violence and despair’ in South Africa at the time made people feel distanced from the hopeful demonstrations it displays’ (in Dutka, 1992b). In a study of the early 1990s youth, Bundy states that the youth were disillusioned by the ‘politics of negotiations’ as they felt ‘side-lined, marginalised, and demobilised,’ and that ‘their contribution at the forefront of the struggle was being undervalued’ (1994: 61). *Sarafina!* plays a significant role in acknowledging the contributions of the youth and to encourage the audience to consider the idea of peace and reconciliation. But, other than putting down their weapons, it does not go further to suggest what political role the youth could play in the present or future. The film ends with Sarafina playing Mandela, thus emphasising the role adults can play in the peace building process, but not the youth. Roger Ebert described the film as ‘a misguided attempt to take an inspirational musical and turn it into a half-hearted attempt to deal with the labyrinth of South African politics, by filmmakers who lack a clear idea of what they want to say or how they want to say it’ (1992). It can be argued that the filmmakers may not have known how “to say it,” but they certainly knew what they wanted to say. With Sarafina playing Mandela, it becomes very clear that the film serves to pass on the message of the fathers rather than that of the youth.

It is important to note that the film drew the attention of African political leaders. Nelson Mandela, the leader of the African National Congress (ANC), attended the film's premiere as the guest of honour. Other members of the ANC, Oliver Tambo and Thabo Mbeki, were also present. It is possible that it did not go unnoticed that in the first democratic elections, 'fully half of the projected electorate of 21 million [would] be voters under the age of thirty. About one-third of the potential voters [would] be under the age of twenty-five' (Bundy, 1994: 62). As such, it was important for politicians to still maintain the support of the youth. Politicians were also aware of 'the significance of the media in representing the aspirations of the citizens of the nation' (Maingard, 1997: 6). Within this context, there developed a symbiotic relationship between the politicians and the film. On one hand, the film drew people's attention to the politicians and provided an opportunity for the politicians to remind people that the "fathers" had not forgotten the sacrifices of the youth. On the other hand, the politicians' acknowledgement of the film had the potential of contributing to its financial success through the publicity it created both locally and internationally. In the documentary *1994: The Bloody Miracle* (Meg Rickards and Bert Haitsma, 2014), Nelson Mandela is shown wearing a *Sarafina!* promotional cap in a scene that uses archival footage from the early 1990s.⁶⁵ The marketing of the film was indeed successful because 'the movie had the highest opening weekend per-screen average of any South African film ever' (Dutka, 1992b). Although this success should be seen as the result of a combination of various marketing strategies, the film's marketing deliberately drew attention to the "father figures," which suggests that the film was marketed as more than just the representation of a girl's experience of the anti-apartheid struggle. It can be said that the film became part of the "events" that

⁶⁵ The documentary uses archival footage and interviews to explore the forms and causes of the early 1990s violence in South Africa, and how that impacted the political negotiation process.

made up the background of the “political spectacle,” thus inhibiting any critical consideration of the representation of the girl.⁶⁶

Category “Female”

The old men are prisoners. The young men have fled. Only women and babies now in Soweto.

Sarafina!, 1992

The above quote from a song the children sing in the film while in prison speaks to the perceived stereotypical gendered relationship between men, women and the struggle. Men are seen as activists and fighters, while women look after babies at home. This is despite the fact that, as Maloba (2007: 39) notes, ‘there were [also] female guerrillas⁶⁷ in the MK [*Umkonto we Sizwe*].’⁶⁸ The song can also be seen as giving the impression that women were not really a threat to the apartheid government because the statement ‘only women and babies now in Soweto’ seems to imply that there is no one left to fight. With this song, therefore, the film undermines its own representation of women like Mary Masambuka, who is arrested for her activism. Maingard argues that the film ‘privileges black male experience [while]

⁶⁶1994: *The Bloody Miracle* gives the impression that a significant portion of the political maneuvering and power play happened behind closed doors, away from the eye of the media and the public. The term “political spectacle” is used here to imply that what the public saw was not the full picture.

⁶⁷ The term guerrilla can be defined as ‘a name given to armed movements that ... by attacking across state frontiers, seek to contest the power of the state, and which frequently establish their own rule in territories over which the established state has lost control’ (Bereketeab, 2016: 12-13). Guerrilla movements are often characterized by ‘their small units and their hide and attack tactics’ (Bereketeab, 2016: 13).

⁶⁸ *Umkonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation) was the armed wing of the ANC and SACP (South African Communist Party).

marginalizing and stereotyping black female experience' (1994: 241). This can also be seen in the way the song separates old men and young men into different categories with different experiences, whereas no attempt is made to separate young women from older women in the category "female." It can be assumed that the women who are mentioned in the song include both old women and girls, which would imply the homogenisation of the category female in which women are stereotyped as mother figures. Another option is to see girls as completely overlooked.

Noticeably, in the "political spectacle" mentioned in the section above, the women whom Ngema mentions as having inspired the story are not included, which brings into question the relationship between women and the postcolonial nation. Guldemann suggests that 'Sarafina's adopting of Mary Masambuka as a role model alongside (eventually even displacing) Nelson Mandela, together with her re-evaluation of her mother, represents the film's attempts' to acknowledge women's contribution to the struggle (1996: 86). And yet, women are not given as much significance as men when imagining a post-apartheid South Africa. There is a certain flexibility that characterises the relationship between women and the nation. Although women become a significant component of the nationalist struggle, they do not have as much influence as men in terms of "acting" for the nation once the struggle is won, that is, when the nation is no longer in crisis mode.⁶⁹

Tanya Lyons states that, 'at the end of a war, women are encouraged to return to the private domestic sphere to facilitate a return to normality' (2004: 21). We see such "encouragement" in *Sarafina!* when Sarafina asks Mary Masambuka what she wants. Mary replies by saying:

⁶⁹ The phrase 'acting for the nation' is in reference to active participation in the public sphere and national policy making bodies.

Me, I want very many things. I want the war to be over. I want the hate to be over.

I want my Joe back in my arms. I want quiet days and loving nights. I want babies. I want to come home to kindness.

Colette Guldemann argues that Mary's statement 'posits a utopian world after the end of apartheid where women will (only want to) be wives and mothers' (1996: 90). This carries the implication that the active roles women play in political struggles are only necessitated by the struggle and, 'in an ideal world, a world without apartheid, this would not happen' (ibid.). Additionally, Guldemann argues that the statement suggests that 'if Sarafina's desire is "freedom" from racial oppression, then Mary suggests that freedom is really the freedom to be a wife and mother' (1996: 89). Although the statement is expressed as Mary's desire, it is significant for Sarafina because she sees Mary as a role model. At the end of the film, Sarafina even says she wants to be like her teacher.

We also see the glorification of motherhood in the song that Miriam Makeba, who plays Sarafina's mother, sings when Sarafina visits her mother after her prison experience. Maingard mentions that Makeba sings 'as if on a stage and isolated from the film's plot' (1994: 240), which suggests that, rather than being included strictly as a narrative necessity, the song serves a purpose that is outside of the narrative, that of glorifying mothers generally. Looking after children is a very important role in both war and peace times. But McClintock cautions against only emphasising motherhood because this may erase and undermine the multiple other roles that women perform (1991: 117). In a statement similar to Guldemann's, McClintock further argues that women's contributions 'come to be figured as temporary departures from women's manifestly maternal destiny' (ibid.). Tanya Lyons also suggests that

if women are only considered in their roles as mothers, it becomes difficult for them ‘to gain the political recognition for any heroic actions or suffering they may have endured during the war’ (2004: 141). This is because motherhood is often ‘considered to be a natural role – a natural duty that deserves no reward’ (ibid.). While the film attempts to politicise and recognise motherhood for its significance, it does so in a way that undermines the participation of females in roles outside the bounds of the stereotypical feminine roles. We even see Sarafina express regret for her radical and stereotypically masculine actions, and ask for forgiveness.

It should be noted here that Roodt’s film came in the aftermath of Winnie Mandela’s scandalous legal as well as public image issues. Leonard Thompson reports that ‘she had become an arrogant and violent woman,’ and that in June 1991, ‘a judge called her an “unblushing liar”’ during her trial, and ‘found her guilty of kidnapping and assault’ (2014: 251).⁷⁰ This might have influenced the film’s shift in its representation of women. Indeed, the representation of women in the film is the opposite of the way the late 1980s Winnie Mandela is described in *South African History Online* (2011):

Since the latter stages of her exile, rumours had begun to circulate about Winnie’s increasingly erratic behaviour; her recourse to drink and her occasional bouts of violent behaviour. ... her frequent public appearances in khaki uniform did little to quell speculation that her approach to liberation was becoming increasingly military driven and violent.

⁷⁰ She was sentenced to six years in jail but her punishment was later reduced ‘to a two-year suspended sentence and a fine’ in June 1993 when the Supreme Court removed the assault charge but confirmed the kidnapping charge (Thompson, 2014: 251).

In *Sarafina!* the film, category “female” is represented as mostly good, hardworking and committed, whether they be fighting apartheid or financially supporting their families. Most importantly, unlike their male counterparts, the women are averse to violence. Sabela, the black male police officer, is simply a willing puppet of the apartheid regime who gets his kicks from threatening and beating up his fellow black people. He can be contrasted to the female teacher, Mary Masambuka, who is also employed by the government, but finds ways to subvert the imposed school syllabus in order to teach her students things that are relevant to them and their political condition. Although the film does not justify the cruelty of Sabela’s horrible death, the audience can sympathise with Sarafina, who feels terrible for her involvement even though she was not the one to light the matches. Sarafina’s uncle only has beer on his mind, whereas her mother works hard to take care of the family. Sarafina is even more responsible than her drunken uncle; she looks after her siblings. The women are generally kind, wise, hardworking and nurturing. Alternative gender identities expressed in the description of Winnie Mandela above are sacrificed for the desire to represent females in a particular light. The nuancing of gender roles and relations is also sacrificed as category female is presented as the custodian of the preferred national values. Even when the girl crosses over to the “dark side” that is the masculine world, her feminine side often holds her back so that she is not completely out of control.⁷¹

Of further interest is the way Winnie Mandela is contrasted to Nelson Mandela in the *South African History Online* (2011) article:

⁷¹ This is further discussed in the next section on the girl and nationhood.

Whilst Nelson and his Robben Island coterie had become more academic and statesman-like during their years cut-off from grassroots politics, Winnie on the other hand was forced to become a soldier on the ground.

The use of the term “statesman,” clearly exposes the gendered dimension of the imagined character of public politics. But, beyond that, the statement also characterises those involved in grassroots politics as not “statesman-like,” with the implication that they were not exactly in a position to lead the new South Africa.⁷² Additionally, the phrase “more academic” in the statement seems to be linked to “rational thinking,” implying that the men, unlike Winnie Mandela, were of a more stable disposition.

Ngema’s play captures the idea that grassroots politics is what inspired the youth. When Crocodile says he is the one who should play Nelson Mandela in their school play, Sarafina challenges him on the grounds that, unlike him, she is involved in the community’s political gatherings. She says to him:

You never even attend meetings. ... Where were you when Winnie Mandela addressed the masses during the commemoration service of the people who were killed in Soweto last year, huh! ... Where were you when women and young girls went to the Minister of Justice to complain about their children, brothers and sisters who were buried by police two, three or four in one grave? (Ngema, 2005: 79).

⁷² The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines a statesman as ‘one versed in the principles or art of government; especially: one actively engaged in conducting the business of a government or in shaping its policies’ (2017).

Sarafina's statement, which is completely removed from the film, is clearly papered with a feminist perspective with its mention of Winnie Mandela, women and girls, but, beyond that, it highlights the significance of community leadership. With the removal of the recognition of grassroots "statesmanship,"⁷³ the film also removes the recognition of women as political leaders, which means Sarafina no longer has a female political leader to inspire her. In-as-much as her teacher, Mary Masambuka, is an activist; she is not a political leader. The idea of men as political leaders is also reflected in Ngema's statement that '[Winnie Mandela] married Nelson [Mandela] when she was very young and then he was taken away from her. How can you expect a woman like that to remain sane?' (in Goldfarb, 1992). Other than denying her rationality, this statement implies that Winnie Mandela lost her sanity because Nelson Mandela was taken away from her, which reduces her to a wife who could not cope with his husband's absence. A more recent documentary on Winnie Mandela, *Winnie* (Lamche, 2017), suggests that Winnie Mandela was indeed a political leader. In her praise for the film, Milisuthando Bongela (2017) comments that the timing of the film works in its favour. She notes that the film comes out in 'the post-Mandela years,' which have 'revealed the dummy country black people were handed' (ibid.).⁷⁴ This link between timing and historical representations further supports the idea that the political environment plays a role in the way historical identities and events are represented.⁷⁵

⁷³ The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines "statesmanship" as 'the behaviour and actions of an experienced and respected politician or member of a particular profession' (2017).

⁷⁴ This statement also implies that the film is an attempt to provide an alternative to official history.

⁷⁵ Some critics view Lamche's film as excessively one-sided (Mobarak, 2017; Lodge, 2017; van Hoeij, 2017). In a review of the film, Guy Lodge argues that Lamche's one-sidedness does her subject a disservice because 'the life and legacy of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela deserves messier treatment, a film as thorny and agitated and many-angled as the woman it portrays' (2017). This view suggests that "political correctness" gets in the way of a more nuanced representation.

Among other factors, the backlash on Winnie Mandela's alleged behaviour in the early 1990s may have influenced the makers of *Sarafina!* to curb Sarafina's militancy. In her discussion of Zimbabwe's "guerrilla girls,"⁷⁶ Tanya Lyons (2004) points out how after the war communities were uncomfortable and anxious about the women these girls had become when they returned from the war. As shall be discussed below, the film provides some assurances that Sarafina will remain "sane" despite her involvement in political activism. She does not become 'increasingly military driven and violent.' The audience does not have to fear the woman that she might become.

Representations of the Girl

Sarafina and Nationalism

You've been away too long Nelson. You are old now. And your children are dying. And you can't hear us.

Sarafina in *Sarafina!*, 1992

In Roodt's *Sarafina!*, girls' relationship to nationalism is couched within society's belief that girls should grow up to be women, and this impermanence of girlhood plays right into the flexible relationship between women and the nation. Sarafina is able to break out of the traditional female role without challenging the patriarchal order because her adventures are only temporary. Additionally, she only ventures out under "abnormal conditions," which are themselves considered temporary. Thus, Sarafina's actions are not represented as an evolutionary challenge to patriarchal definitions of nationhood in which men have to defend and protect their women and children. Rather, Sarafina's actions are based on the idea that she has to act because, due to limitations outside their control, the fathers cannot. The return

⁷⁶ The girls who participated in the anti-colonial military struggle.

of the fathers should signal a return to normal. She fights for the return of the fathers, and, as the above statement indicates, while doing so, she realises she has to fight under the guidance of the fathers or else all will be lost. The film maintains the patriarchal order by heavily emphasising the imagined presence of a lingering father figure. Also, unlike the play, in which Sarafina is politically socialised from a very young age by her mother and her mother's friend, Victoria Mxenge,⁷⁷ in the film her political awareness only kicks in more visibly after she decides to play Mandela in the school play.

The first time we see Sarafina, she has just woken up, early in the morning. She lights a candle, looks up at an image of Nelson Mandela on the wall and says 'good morning Nelson.' The next high angle shot provides an overview of the room she is in, and judging from where she is sitting and where the image of Nelson Mandela is strategically positioned, this might just be a daily routine. This establishes a significant shift from Ngema's play which takes time to set up Sarafina as an activist in her own right before any mentioning of well-known political activists. Right from the beginning of the play, she is a self-sufficient intelligent girl whom other students look up to, and who also has a keen interest in the history of black South African people.⁷⁸ From Act 1, Sarafina is already highly politically conscious but only mentions Nelson Mandela later on in scene 5 (Ngema, 2005). Sarafina also mentions Nelson Mandela after she has mentioned Shaka Zulu, Cetshwayo and Steve Biko, indicating that

⁷⁷ It is significant that the mother's friend is Victoria Mxenge, a well-known attorney and anti-apartheid political activist who was assassinated on 01 August 1985 by men 'allegedly recruited by the security branch' of the apartheid government (South African History Online, 2011).

⁷⁸ It should be noted that Sarafina is also sexualised in the play through the song that calls her 'pretty mama' and includes the lyrics 'Sarafina when you talk de way you talk, Me body temperature begins to rise ... Sarafina when you walk the way you walk, perspiration commence to cover me' (Ngema, 2005: 43). But this is clearly presented as how others see her and not how she sees herself. In the film, she actively wants to be the centre of attention and to be "looked at."

Mandela is one of the many South African heroic fathers, whereas in the film he becomes “the father.” Where the play establishes Sarafina as interested in the struggles of black people generally, the film establishes her as having a very specific attachment to Nelson Mandela that cannot be fully explained in terms of political consciousness. The figure of Mandela seems to fill a void that the girl’s absent mother and father have left. The figure of Mandela becomes the surrogate parent in whom the girl confides on issues that troubles her and “goes” to for guidance. Symbolically, this can be seen as a paternalistic approach to nationalism because as long as the girl acknowledges the primacy of the father, she remains a dependent child whose fate is tied to that of the father.

In the same scene that we are introduced to Sarafina, we realise that the room she is in is also overcrowded with children younger than her. We find out in the next scene that they are her siblings whom she helps to look after while her mother is away at work. This very domestic scene can be contrasted to the opening scene in which a group of boys break into the school and burn a classroom. With this, the film establishes the gendered experiences of the children. While the boys are attacking the symbols of the apartheid system, the girl performs the role of nurturer. This role of girl as caregiver creates a strong link between girlhood and motherhood, with girls being socialised to be mothers. Anne McClintock argues that during apartheid ‘African women nationalists transformed and infused the ideology of motherhood with an increasingly insurrectionary cast, identifying themselves more and more as the “mothers of revolution” (1991: 116). This ‘image of the militant mother, the revolutionary and political mother’ turned women into ‘the militant protectors of their communities and activist children’ (ibid.). But, as shall be discussed later on in the chapter, the film does not present the mother as “militant.” Rather, Sarafina’s mother represents the value of traditional

motherhood, and Sarafina's disparagement of traditional motherhood is framed to expose her limited wisdom as a child.

However, Sarafina does not see herself as fixed in the role of caregiver. She dreams of becoming a star. She aspires to be someone "to-be-looked-at," which, to a larger extent, does not challenge the stereotypical filmic female role, although it might challenge the stereotypical traditional African woman's role. Colette Guldemann notes that 'the distinction between doing and being is the traditional difference between male and female, particularly in cinema' (1996: 87).⁷⁹ Sarafina's desire to be a star indicates that although she idolises Nelson Mandela, at this point, she is not necessarily inspired by him. She is not really thinking of following in his footsteps. In fact, she is initially of the opinion that political activism leads to prison and no future, which is why, although she likes Crocodile, she is not too keen on dating him because 'he burns down schools.' Thus, she is initially presented to not be a risk-taker, the one quality that the nationalist struggle absolutely demands.

Showing Sarafina as animated by interests other than political could be seen as the film's attempt to puncture what Bundy sees as the largely disproved myth 'that all or most of those in their teens or early twenties [were] politically active' (1994: 61). But then this is expressed in gendered terms. Sarafina and other girls are set apart from the boys who are busy trying to figure out a way to hurt white-owned businesses while she is contemplating what it would mean to date Crocodile. Even when she decides she wants to be Mandela in the school play, it is because she wants to be a star and she does not really think about being like Mandela in the long run:

⁷⁹ Guldemann bases this assertion on Laura Mulvey's classic essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she posits that 'women in cinema signify "to-be-looked-at-ness," while men are the active bearers of the gaze' (Guldemann, 1996: 87).

Why can't I be you Nelson? Just for the school concert. ... Everybody clapping and cheering. Mandela is free and I'm the star. Just for a day, ok Nelson. Your day will come.

The statement does not only emphasise the performative aspect of the undertaking, it also emphasises its impermanence because '[Mandela's] day will come.'

In an argument about who should play Mandela, Crocodile insists that it should be him because he is a man and Sarafina is a girl. Guldemann argues that 'this statement placed Sarafina in the doubly (silenced) positions of female and child (the adult term man versus the term girl)' (1996: 95). What is perhaps interesting in this exchange is that unlike in the play in which Sarafina fights her own battle, it takes the teacher, Mrs Masambuka, to rescue her from the confrontation and to make sure her side is heard. This might be one of the implications that came with having Goldberg in the role of the teacher. Sarafina becomes a recipient of a form of affirmative action from the teacher rather than an agent in the construction of progressive gender dynamics. Additionally, unlike in the play in which she explains that she should be the one to play the part because she is more politically conscious and active, in the film the teacher simply asks her to tell the class what happens in her story. This has the effect of shifting emphasis from her own activism, or lack thereof as is the case at this point in the film, to the image of Nelson Mandela. In the end, the matter is not resolved through Sarafina proving she is a stronger candidate. Crocodile dies, leaving 'Sarafina [as] the only person left to play Nelson' (Guldemann, 1996: 95). The girl is able to do what a "man" should because the boy is no longer there to claim his position.

The boys are more politically aware. It is in fact one of the boys who shows Sarafina how naïve she is in believing that their schools are worth saving. Unlike the boys, she clearly had not figured out that Mrs Masambuka's days at the school were numbered. With this new awareness, she begins to "do" rather than just "be." But she still does not quite understand political activism at first because she misdirects her frustration and aims her anger towards her mother. Unlike the boycott that the boys organise, her form of protest in which she tells her mother that she has 'been a servant for too long,' looks more like a teenager's tantrum rather than a political protest. She throws cushions onto the floor and creates a mess knowing her mother will fix it before her employers come back, and, for this reason, it is difficult to believe her when she declares that she wants 'to kill them.'⁸⁰ She is angry at the apartheid system but it is clear from her behaviour that she needs guidance on how to channel her anger.

Soon after her tantrum, Sarafina switches from her "murderous intentions" to preaching non-violence. When Crocodile goes to her after being beaten by Sabela, he declares that he wants to kill the police officer, but Sarafina responds by saying:

No need for killing. When the people rise up you will see him singing a new song.
When they march ... Constable Sabela will shit himself with fear, and up will go
his fist, viva Mandela viva!

This statement seems out of place because in the film people are already rising up but Sabela is still working for the apartheid police. Even in the realities of the early 1990s, Mandela was out of prison and yet the continuing violence implied that not everyone in South Africa had

⁸⁰ It is not clear whether she means her mother's employers or just white people in general.

raised their fist to say viva Mandela viva! However, the statement is necessary in balancing the representations of violence and hope for peace. The very violent scene of Sabela beating Crocodile and setting the dog on him is followed by Sarafina's kindness as she nurses Crocodile's wounds while calming his anger down.

But, although this scene clearly demonstrates that care giving is an important service in times of violent conflict, Sarafina does not see it as a significant role. When she goes to her teacher, Mary Masambuka, she asks her what she, as a girl, can do because boys can fight. She seems to think of "fighting" in masculinised terms, disregarding what she has been doing all along. As Tanya Lyons notes, supportive and nurturing roles that largely form part of women's activities during political conflicts are often 'portrayed as secondary to the main event' (2004: 22). It should be noted that Sarafina goes to the teacher for advice just after the scene in which she and the other children march at night holding burning torches while singing a song that sounds very much like a declaration of war. The song has the words: 'Sharpen your spears. The war is at your door. We are coming.' The song reflects the dominant masculinised ideas of war. As Jean Bethke Elshtain argues, women are often absent from definitions of war 'partly due to the definition of what constitutes the "front," [and] who decides where this is located' (in Lyons, 2004: 25). Sarafina's question of what girls can do may therefore be seen as reflecting her own patriarchal conditioning when it comes to the definition of "fight."

The teacher tells Sarafina that 'there are other ways' to contribute to the struggle, and that she has to find her own way. While the teacher's response is significant for implying that fighting can take many different forms, it also seems to confirm that Sarafina should not be considering fighting the same way that boys do. From this moment, Sarafina goes on a quest

to find her own way of fighting. But the quest, which comes after her teacher is taken away by the police, seems to spiral down the “wrong” violent path until she discovers the error of her violent approach.

When the teacher is taken away she tells Sarafina to get rid of the gun that Sarafina once saw at her house. After Sarafina collects the gun, the film cuts to the image of Nelson Mandela that she spoke to at the beginning of the film. But this time Sarafina completely ignores the picture as she searches for a place in the house to hide the gun. This indicates that in addition to losing the guidance of her teacher, she no longer seeks Mandela’s guidance too; she is on her own. And, once on her own, she shifts towards a more aggressive approach towards the struggle. She is involved in inciting a protest during the history class with the new teacher. This protest leads to the violent confrontation with the police in which crocodile is shot dead. She is involved in a street protest that also results in a violent confrontation with the police. But her darkest experience comes when she is part of the group of children that kills Sabela by burning him alive.

The method used to kill Sabela is not exactly “necklacing,” but it is close enough. “Necklacing,” that is, ‘murder inflicted using a tyre filled with ignited gasoline’ was the subject of controversy during the 1980s (Butler, 2009: 25). Anthony Butler notes that ‘[Winnie] Mandela was demonised in white SA and abroad’ for her April 1986 speech in which she supported “necklacing” (ibid.). She ‘declared that “together, hand in hand, with that stick of matches, with our necklace, we shall liberate this country”’ (ibid.). Butler explains that ‘there was some equivocation around necklacing in 1985 and 1986, with Oliver Tambo arguing they were “not happy” with the necklace but would not condemn those driven to use it’ (2009: 26). In the heat of the moment, while Sabela is being executed, we hear

Sarafina's voice-over justifying this horrific act even as we witness just how barbaric and cruel it is. She says: 'They had pushed us too far. They had stopped treating us like humans, and we had to take a stand somewhere.'

In a way, the film attempts to stay true to history by showing the extreme levels of violence that the youth resorted to, but, with Sarafina's statement, it also emphasises the fact that this was part of the circle of violence the youth were caught up in; the youth were reacting rather than just acting. Also, although the film shows that the youth were driven to use this cruel punishment, it also manages to retain some of Sarafina's innocence because she walks away before the match is lit. In the end, she could not do it. Lyons notes that 'in contemporary discourses of war,' women are often stereotyped as essentially nurturers who 'should not want to have anything to do with "the destructive enterprise of war"' (2004: 21). This is how Sarafina is characterised in this particular moment. Even though the girl is represented as active in the struggle, she does not use extreme violence.

It is difficult to determine the extent of girls' involvement in the more violent activities of the mid 1970s and 1980s, but the fact that they were arrested too indicates that they were involved on some level. The fact that Sarafina is politically conscious, and yet averse to violence ties in with W. O. Maloba's observation 'that involvement of women in combat remains a delicate, if not controversial, aspect of war' (2007: 41). The film does not challenge what Olivia Bennett, Jo Bexley and Kitty Warnock describe as 'an ambivalence ... about women using violence in cold blood, or inflicting brutality' (in Maloba, 2007: 44). Sarafina's youth gives her some leeway to be rebellious but, in the end, it does not absolve her from what is expected of female subjects. And this female stereotype was suited to the needs of the early 1990s political environment.

We also see the girl's aversion to extreme violence in an earlier incident when Sarafina discovers that one of the boys, Guitar, is an informer for the apartheid police. She reports him to the rest of the group, an act that presents her as someone who puts the struggle first, but she also saves him from the punishment that he might have received from the other boys. Instead of judging the act of betrayal in isolation like the rest of her group, Sarafina investigates the context of said betrayal. She uncovers that Guitar only betrayed his friends to protect his father. The only "punishment" that Guitar receives is promising that he will never do it again. Once the whole truth is discovered, Guitar is reintegrated into the group. This is in fact the reconciliatory message that the "fathers" such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu were preaching in the 1990s. The message culminated in the setting up of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) 'in terms of the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act*, No 34 of 1995,' with Archbishop Desmond Tutu as the chairperson. The TRC set up hearings in which 'perpetrators of violence [during apartheid] could ... give testimony and request amnesty from prosecution' (*South African History Online*, 2011). Thus, the girl acts as a proponent for integration.

Sarafina later explains why she could not bring herself to kill or witness the killing of Sabela in a scene that signals the return of the "prodigal daughter." After the death of Sabela, Sarafina and many other children are arrested and tortured in prison. While there, Sarafina, for the first time since her train ride to her mother's work place, speaks to Nelson Mandela again. She tells Mandela she killed a man, but this time, instead of justifying her actions, she seems to be in search for answers because she feels lost. She and the other children in prison realise that they need some kind of leadership as indicated by the song which they sing: 'The black nation is dying. Who will lead us to the day of peace?' Sarafina's voiceover

demonstrates that she is now once again open to Mandela's leadership and guidance. She asks if killing Sabela is what Mandela would want. But we can assume the answer is no because by 1992, the ANC's 'information and publicity department was able to state without contradiction that necklacing "is a barbaric and unacceptable method of execution which the ANC has never condoned"' (Butler, 2009: 25-26). In Sarafina's voiceover, the film also assures the audience that Sarafina is not completely lost to the dark side by reminding the viewer that she is not the one who lit the match. But it is not clear whether what she expresses is regret for the killing of Sabela. She says:

I hated him so much I wanted to kill him. But then I saw his eyes. See what they've done to me Nelson. They filled me up with hate. But not enough. I have to be so full of hate. There is no room for anything else. Make me numb Nelson. Make me numb.

Roger Ebert (1992) argues that the film 'shows black children committing murder, and lacks either the courage to condemn them for it, or the courage to say it was justified.' But then this ambiguity could also suggest that the children were not always sure of themselves, and that they were complex political victims/perpetrators. However, the ambiguity could also reflect the conditions of the early 1990s when it was difficult to tell what violent acts could be justified and what could not.

The above statement by Sarafina refers to the chilling moment in which Sarafina locks eyes with Sabela just before he is burnt to death. She probably felt something other than hate, and that is why she could not stick around to watch him burn. Perhaps what is most significant in Sarafina's statement is the part where she expresses her desire to stop feeling, to become

numb. She cannot stop herself from having emotions other than hate, and it is because she has these feelings that she is not blinded by hate. And, by admitting that she feels, she reacquaints herself with her feminine side, that part that would rather heal than hurt someone. In a statement that echoes her teacher's, Sarafina informs Mandela that she wants to be 'free from the hating and killing,' and also wants 'to live [her] life with the people [she] love[s].'

In Ngema's play, Colgate states that 'we had seen people changing after they had been detained. Others tend to be government spies. ... But ... Sarafina ... she came back stronger than ever' (Ngema, 2005: 61). But, in the film, the prison experience changes Sarafina. This change can be linked to the conditions of the interregnum period. Eileen MacDonald has noted that 'in times of war ... women are permitted to enter the arena of violence – up to a point ... But as soon as the war [is] over they [a]re glad, we are led to believe, to go back to their "natural" roles' (in Lyons, 2004: 19). The film reflects a re-inscription of women into the domestic sphere and "traditional" roles. Guldemann argues that 'the film sets up binaries which involve either being an activist, a position which will, by the end of the film, be set up as a "male" category or alternatively occupying a non-violent position that will be specifically identified with motherhood' (1996: 90). Sarafina chooses, or rather goes back to the latter.

It would be too simplified to argue that Sarafina comes full circle because there are some changes in her at the end of the film. However, there is still a sense that she returns to some version of her former self. Her experience does not turn her into an adult. From the prison, she goes straight to visit her mother in a scene that Roger Ebert (1992) describes as 'most puzzling' partly because 'it sounds as if Sarafina is apologizing for being radical, and honouring her mother for the patience and courage it takes to be a domestic.' As puzzling as

the scene may be, it reaffirms that Sarafina is still a child who needs her mother's care. Guldemann argues that the representation of Sarafina and her mother in this scene 'seems almost to invoke a sense of return to the pre-oedipal – suggesting that Sarafina's (re)turn to her mother is a natural one. She rejects the male world of violence to (re)turn to the female world of mothering which involves, for her, being a daughter' (1996: 94). And being a daughter also means being with her siblings and taking care of them. After visiting her mother, we see her reunite with her siblings whom she had not been able to look after when she got arrested.

Towards the end of the film, when she tries to convince Guitar to continue with their plans to do the school play, she explains that she wants to sing their song 'just once.' Guldemann argues that in the end, 'Sarafina finally rejects her activist role and returns to (the idea of) being a star' (1996: 95). But the film complicates this interpretation by combining the visuals of Sarafina's last performance with that of the performance at the funeral earlier on in the film. In fact, the last image we see of her is from the funeral performance. However, it is clear that Sarafina is no longer the aggressive person that she had become.

The film emphasises that the violent person that Sarafina had become was only temporary. This is symbolised by her throwing away the gun she was hiding in her house. It is almost as if her actions had simply reflected her 'specific stage of life'; puberty, which Brett and Specht argue 'is a time when injustice and its unacceptability are strongly felt' (2004: 3). Dutka reports that 'one high-level member of the ANC commented [that] Sarafina should not have thrown away the AK-47 at the end [because] getting rid of that symbol of resistance suggests that the struggle is over' (1992b). However, when speaking of this scene, Roodt says 'Picking up an AK-47 to kill ... may sometimes be acceptable ... It's impossible to say. Issues like

these are elusive and shadowy because the goal posts are always moving' (in Dutka, 1992a). The filmmakers clearly saw the political landscape as having shifted enough in the early 1990s to warrant the throwing away of the gun.

Alexander Johnston notes that the 1976 Soweto uprising was sparked by the ideas of the Black Consciousness (BC) (2014: 89), and that BC was 'firmly embedded in African nationalist tradition and mythology in its emphasis on generational renewal' (2014: 91).⁸¹ Yet, the film's emphasis is not generational renewal but deference to the older generation. Sarafina ends up working on behalf of the older generation rather than to assert herself independently as a political actor.

The film ends with a re-alignment of Sarafina's wishes to that of Mandela as she becomes him in the play. Guldemann argues that 'what Sarafina takes away from prison is the replacing of Nelson with Mary' because 'it is no longer Nelson she looks up to, but Mary' (1996: 92). However, it should be noted that Mary's death ensures that Sarafina goes back to Nelson as "confidante" and "advisor," and that Mary's non-violent approach to the struggle fits within the ANC's early 1990s public campaign to put an end to violent confrontations. The ANC signed the Pretoria Minute on 21 August 1990 'which proclaimed that [it] would suspend all armed activity,' and in January 1991 Mandela met Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, President of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), 'and agreed to promote peace' (*South African History Online*, 2011). In a way, therefore, it is not about one person replacing the other but rather a case of hegemonic ideas being channelled through Mary. And, of course, women and girls are ideal for channelling such a message as they are stereotyped as averse to violence.

⁸¹ Johnston explains this generational renewal as 'the idea that it is the mission of young people to purify and renew African nationalism periodically' (2014: 91).

As mentioned earlier, in the early 1990s some youths felt they had just been a means to an end as they were now being overlooked in the negotiation process. This is something worth examining in relation to *Sarafina!*, given that the film centres on the experiences of a girl during the anti-apartheid struggle and yet emphasises the role of the father figure in post-apartheid South Africa.

Sarafina and the “New” South Africa

We can explore one of the possibilities of what happens to the girl activist when the fathers return using the events at the film’s premiere in Johannesburg, especially the moment when Leleti Khumalo, who plays Sarafina in both the play and film, shares a stage with Nelson Mandela.⁸² Anant Singh says that ‘Mandela stood on the stage with Leleti, who was dressed in the Mandela suit she wore in the “Freedom Is Coming Tomorrow” dance sequence on screen’ (in Dutka, 1992b). This was significant because ‘in the film, Sarafina had fantasized about Mandela’s release and for that moment, at least, her dream . . . and reality . . . had come together’ (Dutka, 1992b). Scott Kraft (1992) of the *Los Angeles Times* reports that Nelson Mandela spoke at the film’s premiere, but there is no mention of Sarafina also speaking, if we assume that Khumalo wore the “Mandela suit” to the premiere because she was there in character. Indeed, Mandela was free, and Sarafina was the star who looks at the camera and says nothing because ‘Stars don’t do, stars just be.’ There is a possibility that Khumalo spoke at the event but the media chose to silence her, which also makes the same point.

It is relevant to draw the link between the film and the events at the film’s premiere because the relationship between both the play and the film, and the lives of the young people who

⁸² Mandela was by now a largely internationally recognisable figure. He had ‘won the battle for external support’ (Thompson, 2014: 255).

performed in them was drawn upon as a marketing strategy. Colleran states that *Sarafina!*'s promotional information 'insistently drew attention to the fact that the performance was enacted by the very children who had been brutalised by apartheid' (1998: 233). Indeed, the youngsters were portrayed as part of the struggle as the advertisements suggested that, on their return home, they might face 'further repression and reprisal' for participating in the play (ibid.). In a 1988 article in *The New York Times* titled 'Theater: Cast of "Sarafina!" Evokes Their Lives In South Africa,' Wilborn Hampton points out that 'the young people in "Sarafina!" are from the same streets of the same townships' as those portrayed in the play and film. Singh adopts the same strategy for the film by saying 'the kids in the cast were performing what they lived' (Singh in Dutka, 1992a). By that logic, the voice of the cast in the interregnum period should have mattered too.

There was also an attempt to conflate Leleti Khumalo's experiences and that of Sarafina. During a press conference, Khumalo is reported to have said:

"Sarafina!" is my story ... I grew up in a community where everyone was talking 'Mandela, Mandela, Mandela' – he was like a god to me. Last year, the Zulus brutalized my brother, shot him in the thigh when he refused to join their cause. That's one of the reasons why I'm so happy to do this film. It's like fighting – but in another way . . . communicating instead of burning buildings (in Dutka, 1992a).

In this statement, Khumalo makes it clear that she saw her participation in the film as a form of fighting, which implies that the political negotiations had not exactly brought about an end to the struggle. The value of communication that she expresses is in line with the message of the film, which emphasises non-violent means of handling conflict. This places the statement

within the marketing strategy of the film. However, Khumalo also adds something that is ignored in the film: the idea that activism was not always voluntary, but was sometimes enforced through violence. This shows that she was willing to be more critical of the youth than the film, and saw herself not just as a “star” but an activist of the early 1990s. The fact that she was no longer the child that performed in Ngema’s play but an adult,⁸³ suggests that her activism as a child was not just temporary, but something that she brought along into adulthood.

This contrast between *Sarafina* and Khumalo demonstrates that the experiences of girls in the anti-apartheid struggle were more nuanced than the film portrays, and that their activities in the political sphere were not necessarily temporary. The film is however successful in its consideration of the needs of the political conditions of the early 1990s because, to an extent, it contributes to the campaign to end violence.

Conclusion

This chapter used Roodt’s *Sarafina!* to explore the representations of the “place” of girls both within the nationalist struggle and after the struggle has been won. It established that there is a strong connection between *Sarafina!*’s production context and the ideological framing of the film. Many of the changes the filmmakers made to the original play on which the film is based demonstrate that the film does not seek to serve the same purpose as the play, although perhaps it is driven by similar commercial imperatives. Indeed, the play and the film could not possibly serve the same purpose because the socio-political conditions which shaped the play had changed. Where the play, in line with the needs of the 1980s, sought to popularise

⁸³ She married Ngema in 1992.

the anti-apartheid struggle, the film sought to popularise the need to end violent means of confrontation in line with the needs of the political environment of the early 1990s.

Exploring the differences between the play and the film brings out the idea that both productions subordinated the voices of the girls who participated in the anti-apartheid struggle for the benefit of the perceived political environment. The representations of the experiences of girls are dependent on, and in service of the dominant African nationalist ideologies of their time. But perhaps what is most significant is that these ideologies are not expressed in gender neutral terms. The play emphasises Sarafina's militancy, which at times even exceeds that of boys, in a way that seems to suggest that if the apartheid system has pushed even a girl to fight like this, then it surely must be evil and should be destroyed. However, in the film, which was made when the apartheid system had been brought to its knees, the girl becomes a tool for nation building, rejecting violence in favour of reconciliation and integration. But here again, the gender of the girl helps to make the necessary point because women are generally stereotyped as averse to violence.

Therefore, *Sarafina!*, instead of exploring the multiple voices and subject positions of girls during the youth uprising, uses the stereotypes associated with the "female" to express nation building values. Any departures from these stereotypes are considered temporary, which means that the patriarchal order is not challenged. The film concludes by asserting the patriarchal system through emphasising the role of the now returned fathers in leading the country to peace.

Sarafina! does not challenge the patriarchal system. It is seen as "normal." The next chapter looks at Ingrid Sinclair's *Flame*, which demonstrates that patriarchy needs to be challenged

even within the context of nationalist struggles. But, once again, analysis of the film will focus on exploring ideological and other influences that impact on the representations of girls who participated in nationalist struggles.

Chapter Four

Flame and the Feminist View of Girl Soldiers

Introduction

Everyone wants to pretend they were very good. ... But there are lives – like my own – damaged lives, that will never be repaired, because of the trauma.

Maureen Moyo in *Zimbabwe Women Writers* (2000: 182)

Generally, we were very happy ... Basically, my memories of these camps are not horrible at all except for the experiences of losing my friends.

Mavis Ntathi in *Zimbabwe Women Writers* (2000: 144-145)

Released sixteen years after Zimbabwe's first democratic elections, Ingrid Sinclair's *Flame* (1996) recalls the past to make a political point about the present conditions of former girl soldiers.⁸⁴ As such, the depictions in the film take the form of a symbolic representation of "the" female experience in which the narrative is driven by a specific political agenda that relates to the present. This means, for example, that the experiences of women like Maureen Moyo as per the above statement are privileged over those of women like Mavis Ntathi.⁸⁵ The political agenda subordinates the voices and interests of girl soldiers as determined by their historical space, time, and circumstances. That is, there is a discernible influence of present

⁸⁴ Zimbabwe had its first democratic elections in 1980 after achieving independence from the British settlers. The former girl soldiers had already grown into adults by the time the film was made.

⁸⁵ Maureen Moyo and Mavis Ntathi are former girl soldiers who fought in the Zimbabwe Liberation War.

politics on the way that the girl soldiers' historical experiences are narrated. In that sense, *Flame* is very similar to *Sarafina!*, whose representations are also influenced by the political environment of its production context. But, unlike *Sarafina!*, *Flame* sets out to challenge the official history as determined by the main beneficiaries of the anti-colonial nationalist struggle, that is, the patriarchs.⁸⁶ Because of its aim to challenge dominant ideas, the film attracted the unpleasant attention of some politicians as well as war veterans. Its "authenticity" was highly contested, sometimes even aggressively. Such challenge did not only occur after the film was released; the filmmakers faced many censorship difficulties during the film's production. It is not clear the extent to which such attention affected the final product, but there are indications that the filmmakers had to make some compromises. This chapter argues that although *Flame* can undoubtedly be seen as a feminist film that attempts to provide a female perspective on the experiences of some Zimbabweans in the liberation war, it is not always successful in representing the voices of the girls who participated in the war. The politics and political actors within the film's production and reception contexts heavily distort the girl soldiers' voices.

Production Context

Flame is the first film about the guerrilla war to be made in Zimbabwe not because other filmmakers had not tried to make similar films before this (Lyons, 2004). Representing the war had for long been deemed a sensitive issue by the ruling elite, a situation that speaks to issues of censorship and a desire to control the construction of history as far as the war is concerned. According to Lyons (2004: 252), in 1981 a South African production company

⁸⁶ Teresa Barnes states that according to the mainstream historiography or nationalist narrative, guerrillas or freedom-fighters 'worked harmoniously with the rural population of Zimbabwe,' and female guerrillas were treated equally and in a non-abusive manner (2007: 246).

wished to shoot a film about a guerrilla war in Zimbabwe but was denied permission. To justify the refusal to have the film shot in Zimbabwe, the country's Minister for Information, Dr. Nathan Shamhuyarira, stated that 're-enacting scenes from a guerrilla war would reopen old wounds in Zimbabwe' (Shamhuyarira in Lyons, 2004: 252).⁸⁷ Another failed attempt to make a film about the liberation war was made in the mid-1980s (Lyons, 2004: 252). Sinclair and her collaborators therefore started their project knowing that they were going to face many difficulties as a result of government and other interferences. The film would also carry a heavy burden of expectations due to being the only fictional film about the guerrilla war. Although at the beginning of the film Nyasha's voice declares that 'this story, the story of two friends, is only one of many,' the film remains the only fictional film to represent the experiences of girl soldiers in the Zimbabwe liberation war.⁸⁸

According to Lyons, the producers of *Flame* emphasised that the film was 'a story about friendship and the war was a backdrop to this,' and that 'it was not supposed to be a documentary history of the entire liberation war, summing up the perspectives of the powers that be' (2004: 269-270). In a way, the filmmakers were being evasive by mentioning that the film would not present the perspectives of the ruling elite, but without explicitly mentioning that the film would be from the perspective of the former girl soldiers. However, saying the film was about friendship implied that the filmmakers were taking a bottom-up approach to their representation, emphasising the perspective of women who had for long been silenced through the ruling elite's privileging of the patriarchal narrative of the war.

⁸⁷ Original source: *The Sunday Mail*, October 11, 1981.

⁸⁸ Nyasha is one of the film's main characters from whose perspective the story is told through a voiceover narrative.

By downplaying the significance of war experiences in their rhetoric about the film, perhaps Sinclair and her collaborators had hoped to minimise the attention they would attract from government authorities. A similar but more radical approach had worked for the producers of the South African film, *Mapantsula* (Schmitz, 1988), who disguised their anti-apartheid film as a gangster movie and ‘submitted a bare-bones and apolitical version’ of the film’s script to the South African authorities for approval (Davies, 1990: 98). However, due to the different circumstances, *Flame*’s producers could not exactly maintain secrecy during the production of the film. Being made in the post-independence era meant that *Flame*’s producers could not rely on “mass support” in subverting the authority of the ruling elite in the same way that the producers of *Mapantsula* may have been able to. In fact, *Flame*’s production process included some people who openly supported the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF). An example of such people is the well-known musician and war veteran Dickson ‘Chinx’ Chingaira who plays the role of Rapo, a liberation fighter. The producers therefore had to come up with a different strategy.

Tanya Lyons indicates that the film’s producers ‘chose to have a policy of “transparency” regarding the film’s production, acknowledging the politically sensitive nature of anything to do with the liberation war’ (2004: 258). Perhaps this was also meant to avoid accusations that the film was made from a white people’s perspective. Due to the colonial hangover as well as the contemporary neo-colonial context, race often becomes a sensitive issue when white people represent identities and experiences of formally colonised people. The film was indeed ‘highly criticised for being produced by a white team’ (Lyons, 2004: 275).⁸⁹ But of

⁸⁹ Sinclair is a white Briton but at the time *Flame* was made she was a Zimbabwean resident (Barnes, 2007: 243).

course, “transparency” meant the film would be subjected to some forms of monitoring by the largely male dominated ruling elite.

Censorship

The policy of transparency adopted by the producers of *Flame* ensured some level of protection for the filmmakers because interactions with state control would then potentially happen in the public sphere. It was also helpful that the film was made at a time when a significant proportion of the Zimbabwean population, including women, was now expressing their dissatisfaction with the experiences of postcolonial Zimbabwe. In such an environment, the filmmakers were assured of some sympathetic responses if they were ever harassed, as they indeed were, by the ruling elite.

During the production process, the police seized the negatives of *Flame* from the producer’s offices on allegations that the film ‘contained subversive information and some of its parts were pornographic’ (Lyons, 2004: 258). The film was later returned when the police and the censorship board found nothing pornographic in the seized material (ibid.). Pornography was mentioned in reference to the rape scene that is in the film, and therefore the seizure can be seen as partly an attempt to silence the voice of girl fighters who were raped in military camps by their fellow fighters.⁹⁰ When reporting on the issue, the *Financial Gazette* alleged that the seizure was orchestrated by war veterans and politicians in an attempt ‘to sanitise the story of the liberation war to suit their immediate needs’ (*Financial Gazette* in Lyons, 2004: 258). The *Financial Gazette*’s allegations seem to have some validity because the film was seized after its producers had voluntarily screened the rough cut to some government and

⁹⁰ Tanya Lyons suggests that censorship around the issue of rape was driven by the idea that ‘as symbols of the nation, women could not be the victims of rape, perpetrated either by the enemy or indeed by their own comrades’ (2004: 260).

government affiliated officials (Lyons, 2004: 258). Lyons states that after the film viewing, the *Sunday Mail* reported that ‘the group “unanimously” objected to the negative portrayal of “liberation efforts”’ (2004: 259). And this can be read as referring to the negative portrayal of male fighters. A member of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veteran Association (ZNLWVA) is reported in the *The Sunday Mail* to have said that they wanted ‘to have the film banned because it [had] stirred concern within [ZNLWVA] members and even at a higher level’ (in Lyons, 2004: 259).

Some scenes that were shot may have been excluded from the film as a result of censorship. According to Tanya Lyons, scenes showing ‘new war recruits being locked up in underground dungeons for interrogation’ were shot but were excluded from the final film (2004: 259). Lyons states that some government officials were not happy about the scene because they felt it portrayed the liberation struggle in a negative light (ibid.). In the final film, when Florence and Nyasha arrive at the military camp, they are first interrogated about why they came to Mozambique in what looks like a very mild version of the descriptions of such interrogations provided by former girl soldiers; the comrades believe their story without any torture involved. This is despite the fact that there are many accounts on how those who joined the training camps were subjected to various forms of torture before they could be accepted into the organisation. Carine Nyamandwe, a former girl soldier, implies that this may have been a necessary security measure meant to root-out “sell-outs” (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 3).⁹¹ She explains how she and other recruits were subjected ‘to harsh treatment for two weeks,’ which resulted in two people admitting that ‘they had been sent by the enemy – the Rhodesian forces’ (ibid.). But Nancy Saungweme, also a former girl soldier,

⁹¹ “Sell-outs” was the term used to refer to spies and informers of the Rhodesian government and security forces.

found this process unnecessarily cruel and is ‘convinced some people confessed to things they did not do’ because of the torture (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 48).

In addition to censorship from the ruling elite, the filmmakers’ objectives for the film, which, as shall be discussed later, may have been linked to the film’s funding, also meant they had to exclude some of the girls’ experiences from the film. For example, soon after Florence and Nyasha join the military camp, they witness a punishment session in which a soldier is brutally beaten. In this instance, the film affirms the already established fact that the military camp is male dominated.⁹² The punishment session is led by a man, and a group of the camp’s leadership, seemingly all men, stand behind him while the rest of those who live in the camp, including women, stand on the other side.⁹³ Perhaps the fact that the soldier being beaten is male was meant to avoid another outcry from the “censors” for representing a man brutally beating a woman,⁹⁴ however, it is interesting that throughout the film it is only men who perform all the brutal acts. Saungweme indicates that girls were tortured and women were also involved in torturing new recruits when she says ‘I was beaten; my buttocks hurt. ... They urged me to confess that I was a spy. It was not just men who interrogated us, women too’ (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 48). Woman against girl violence is however eliminated from *Flame*, thus maintaining the gendered binaries man/woman, bad/good, and perpetrator/victim. This can also be seen in the representation of sexual abuse. Prudence Uriri indicates that some female commanders participated in the abuse of other

⁹² Male dominance is established in an earlier scene in which the newly arriving training commander, Comrade Che, is introduced to an all-male leadership committee in the camp.

⁹³ There is a possibility that a few of those standing behind the leader of the punishment session may be women. It is however difficult to tell due to the very masculine mode of dressing.

⁹⁴ Musengezi and McCartney state that men and women were only treated equally when it came to punishment (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: xii).

women by organising girls for the male soldiers (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 74). But complex gender relations and experiences such as these are excluded in favour of clearly delineated binary oppositions.

When speaking about her intentions for the film, Sinclair (in Barnes, 2007: 243) said:

It's time to show African women in a universal light. They're shown as victims, courageously struggling, imbued with wisdom of the earth. Born to die as slaves of circumstances. In other words, different from women in developed countries. I want to go beyond differences to show similarities: their loves and hopes, their failings, their stubbornness, their vanity, even their cruelty – women as full human beings with every nuance and shade of emotion.

This statement suggests that it was not Sinclair's intention to use clearly defined binaries. The choice to use gendered binary oppositions may have been motivated by the Women in Development discourse, which emphasises women's oppression and their need for liberation and social development.

Teresa Barnes argues that it is inaccurate to describe *Flame* 'as a victim of censorship' (2007: 244). But the interferences that the filmmakers had to endure and some of the implications of such interference on the final product indicates that the film was a victim of censorship. However, the film was not a "helpless victim" because the filmmakers figured out ways to creatively express their feminist ideas and subvert patriarchal control. But still, some of the innovative ways of expression resulted in some of the filmmakers' ideas being lost in translation.

Creative Expression as a Double-edged Sword

One only has to look at the Soviet films of the 1920s such as Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) as well as Grigoriy Aleksandrov and Sergei M. Eisenstein's *October* (1928), to realise that creative ways of expression are not always so easy for the audience to decipher.⁹⁵ This is indeed the case with some of the scenes in *Flame*. A good example is the rape scene involving the title character, Flame, and Che, one of the male leaders in the military camp.

The rape scene was not exactly as Sinclair had intended because some of the male actors rewrote it on set (Lyons, 2004: 255). But, although the interference by male actors inhibited the free expression of the filmmaker's ideas, Sinclair managed to creatively incorporate some of her ideas through the camera work. When Che attacks Flame and drags her to his bed, the camera delicately pans away from the characters. This was perhaps meant to spare the audience the gruesome graphical details of the rape, but it may also have been a way to avoid explicitly showing sexual intercourse onscreen.⁹⁶ As the camera pans, the audience is reminded that this is still rape through the sound of Flame's protests. Significantly, in what might be a reference to the 'sex or marriage for "soap" and survival' phenomenon that Tanya Lyons (2004: 195) says characterised women's experiences in the camps, the camera rests on some beer bottles and tinned food on a makeshift table in the room. The sex for soap issue is

⁹⁵ Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s such as Vertov and Eisenstein are well known for their expressive and innovative editing approaches which demanded a highly attentive viewer with an awareness of his/her socio-economic and political environment.

⁹⁶ As mentioned earlier, the filmmakers were accused of including pornographic material in their film.

also hinted at just after Florence and Nyasha's arrival at the military camp.⁹⁷ When a group of women, including the new recruits, Florence and Nyasha, are chatting among themselves, one of the women who have been living in the camp for a while mentions that 'some people will do anything for soap or a tin of meat.' Assuming that she is the one being referred to as "some people," another woman responds by saying 'at least I feed myself.' When Nyasha, who is holding a book, asks her how she gets the soap, she says, 'it's not by reading books.'

In a later scene, when the group of women is sitting outside, one of them says: 'we've got to get more food. My periods have even stopped.'⁹⁸ To this, another woman responds by saying, 'at least you won't get pregnant.' Thus, the filmmaker consistently links women's access to food and other basic needs to sexual exploitation. According to many former girl soldiers as well as academic researchers, "sex for soap and food" was a serious issue for women soldiers during the war. Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi, a researcher, explains that some leaders, who were mostly male, 'manipulated their position as keepers and distributors of basics in a situation of extreme scarcity' (2000: 7). When speaking about this issue, Freedom Nyamubaya (in Lyons, 2004: 256), a former girl soldier, says:

There was sexual torture, seduction, co-option and rape by any means. When no one in the camp has eaten for three days, a chef [commander] might have food and offers it to you. After you have eaten it, it is a privilege and hence you are obliged to have sex with him.

⁹⁷ Florence and Nyasha change their names to Flame and Liberty, respectively, after joining the war.

⁹⁸ Reports have indicated that many adolescent girls stop menstruating 'during armed conflict because of malnutrition and trauma' (Mazurana et al., 2002: 114).

Nyamubaya also mentions that it was difficult for women to say no to sexual advances because of the imbalance of power between men and women (ibid.).⁹⁹ In *Flame*, when one of the male comrades comes to fetch the girls so that they can go and “entertain” some male comrades, it does not seem that saying no is an option. Echoing Nyamubaya’s statement, another former girl soldier, Prudence Uriri, says that ‘it was one of the rules that when you were sent to do something, you had to do it’ (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 66). This went to the point where some girls ‘were forced into relationships ... with the big bosses’ (Uriri in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 73).

In *Flame*, Nyasha/Liberty manages to fend off the attention of one of the male comrades by biting the hand that he uses to grab her. The man slaps her but lets her go. This indicates that women were not always defenceless. But the slap she receives hints at the brutal punishment that some women and girls had to endure for refusing the attention of male fighters. Prudence Uriri, mentioned above, is an example of one of the female soldiers who managed to get out of forced relationships (Uriri in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 74). But Nhongo-Simbanegavi suggests that, unlike adult and educated women, girls and illiterate women were more vulnerable to sexual abuse probably because some of the ‘older or more educated women’ had a more sharpened ‘ability to identify and articulate exploitative sexist tendencies’ (2000: 8). Lyons echoes a similar sentiment stating that ‘some women experienced more equality than others’ (2004: 191). Newly arriving girls were also

⁹⁹ Nhongo-Simbanegavi points out that ‘most of the so-called women were in fact children, young girls hardly past puberty’ and the ‘war made them women before they were ready’ (2000: 122).

particularly vulnerable because some men thought they ‘were still free from sexually transmitted diseases that afflicted the camps’ (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000: 61).¹⁰⁰

What is disconcerting in the rape scene is that Comrade Che rapes Florence after telling her that he loves her. It is perhaps because of this statement, that many viewers missed Sinclair’s subtle hints that Flame is a victim of a sexual predator in a situation where her ability to defend herself from such people is highly limited. A majority of the viewers ‘responded to the rape scene during the screenings in Harare as if it was a romantic encounter, whistling and cheering’ (Lyons, 2004: 255). Lyons suggests that this might be because the moviegoers ‘are a product of a patriarchal society, which encourages the sexual subjugation of women’ (2004: 255). Lyons notes that the scene also renewed the “colonial hangover” perceptions in which women and girl guerrilla fighters were viewed as prostitutes who “slept around in the bush” (2004: 255). Thus, the film’s subtle ways of representing rape and the unequal power between men and women/girls may not have been very effective. Perhaps Freedom Nyamubaya, who was raped in the war, had a point when she criticised *Flame* for what she saw as its unrealistic treatment of rape. She said, ‘in a rape a jaw could get broken for example. It is usually vicious!’ (Nyamubaya in Lyons, 2004: 257). It seems the film needed a more direct approach which left no room for misinterpretation in order to effectively represent this particular experience.

In a later scene, Che apologises to Flame for raping her. Once he finishes apologising, he tells her to go, but Florence decides to stay. In an act that seems to imply forgiveness, Florence

¹⁰⁰ Some newly arriving boys were also sexually abused, although rarely, by female officers, but then boys could shame these officers publicly unlike girls, for whom being raped brought shame onto the victim (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000: 63).

puts her gun aside and walks over to where Che is sitting and sits next to him. When speaking about this scene, Sinclair (in Lyons, 2004: 256) says:

Flame does not fall in love with Che, but when he asks for forgiveness, she decides it's better [to forgive him] ... rather than keeping herself a victim, but that is not spoken in the dialogue. It's true what actually happened to people was far nastier than what happened to her.

Freedom Nyamubaya also mentions that a relationship with a male chef (boss) meant less problems (in Lyons, 2004: 257). Thus, Florence's decision may have indeed been a social navigation strategy. But Sinclair's objective was clearly missed by many viewers. At a screening of the film 'some vocal male members of the audience yelled out in Shona, "She's coming back for seconds!"' (Lyons, 2004: 255), thus praising the rapist's prowess.

Also, the fact that rape victims could not speak freely about their experience or seek recourse does not come out as clearly. In fact, Nyasha seems to regard Florence as a coward because of the way she handles her situation. In the voiceover, Nyasha mentions that she wanted Florence to report Che and have him punished, but Florence would not do it because 'she was afraid.' Margaret Dongo, a former girl soldier, states that when a girl or woman was raped, there was no justice for her or a court of law, and if she got pregnant she would just be taken to a 'special camp for women who were pregnant' (Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 126). According to Tanya Lyons, Joyce "Teurai Ropa" Mujuru, who was the head of the Department of Women's Affairs in ZANU during the war, mentioned in an interview that she could not act against rape because often women did not report such cases, and when they did, men would complain to her if she tried to act (2004: 262). Nhongo-Simbanegavi, however,

states that ‘women’s complaints of sexual abuse by senior male guerrillas abound in ZANLA’s administrative records’ (2000: 7). All these nuances surrounding the issue of rape are not clearly articulated in the film.

In another scene, which occurs soon after Florence and Nyasha join the military camp, the two girls witness a beating in which a male soldier is being punished by a male officer for a transgression that the audience is not informed about. Not knowing the “crime” that the soldier committed allows the audience to witness the brutality of the punishment without being in a position to judge the moral justification of such punishment. In this scene, the film is able to introduce both the two characters and the audience to the culture of fear that characterises life in the military camp. Sinclair challenges the dominant narrative by political elites which promotes the idea that loyalty in the military organisations was inspired by positive motivation achieved, for example, through political education. This dominant narrative has also been challenged by former girl soldiers. Nancy Saungweme explains that the socio-political environment at the camps was complex: ‘everything and everybody was shrouded in fear’ (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 50). Sometimes people accused of being spies were paraded and beaten in public while everyone watched (ibid.). *Flame* establishes fear as the dominant strategy for gaining recruits’ loyalty because Florence and Nyasha are first introduced to the idea of punishment before they start their political education. However, not knowing the crime committed may result in the audience simply assuming that those being beaten probably deserved their punishment, thus missing the idea that in the military camps control was partly through fear.

The need to find creative ways of representing “taboos” negatively impacted the effectiveness of the film to a great extent. But the filmmakers’ options were very limited; they could not

freely express their ideas or the voices of the former girl soldiers. However, despite the censorship exerted through various means, including harassment, the filmmakers were able to resist some of the pressure. This was partly because the film was financed through international funders and not the state or state-affiliated organisations. However, international funding brought with it some global influences on the representation of the girl soldiers as well as women in the film.

Funding and Global Influences

Sinclair's representations in the film should not be seen as solely influenced by local conditions because her film is exactly the type that international funders would be interested in. As mentioned in Chapter Two, *Flame* was funded by Media for Development Trust (MFD), which falls under Development Through Self-Reliance (DSR), a US based NGO whose focus is to promote development in so-called developing countries (Fisher, 2010: 114). The film reflects global power dynamics in which development narratives are privileged over other stories and experiences of African people. Marjorie Mbilinyi has argued that the Women in Development (WID) discourse 'is the dominant discourse about "women" and/or gender in African countries, and other perspectives find it increasingly difficult to be heard or to get funding' (in Lyons, 2004: 8). It is probably for this reason that the producers of *Flame* did not only focus on girl soldiers' experiences, but linked those experiences to the current development needs of women. That is, the story is not just about girl soldiers, it is also about women in postcolonial Zimbabwe. And both the girls and the women are not in total control of the way they are represented because the agenda is set elsewhere. To borrow Tanya Lyons' words, the film's representations can be seen as also reflecting 'something other than the women ex-combatants to whose lives, histories, and experiences they refer' (2004: 11).

This WID discourse could also explain the inclusion of some scenes that seem odd and yet are related to themes of women's struggle for emancipation. For example, there is a scene in which one of the women fighters writes on her t-shirt the words '*simba remadzimai*' (the strength of women). Nyasha asks her if the t-shirt is bulletproof, and the woman responds in the affirmative. The woman is later killed in battle just after she puts down the "bulletproof" t-shirt she had been carrying on her shoulders. This scene can be read in many ways. The fact that she gets shot just after putting the t-shirt down might imply that women need to be resilient and keep their strength in order to survive. On the other hand, her death may mean that women are currently facing a situation that seems hopeless; they need more effective tools to survive and develop rather than a symbolic gesture such as words on a t-shirt. The phrase later comes back towards the end of the film when Florence is trying to figure out her future and she says to Nyasha, 'I am a survivor. Nyasha remember *simba remadzimai*. The strength of women.' Nyasha, in a response that betrays a hint of pessimism, sarcastically says 'Oh sure. It's bullet proof.'

However, despite the external influences, the film is still relevant to local conditions because it contributed to the discussion of issues of gender disparity that were already in the public sphere and also those that had for many years after the war remained taboo subjects. Lyons states that *Flame*'s release 'was followed by a debate on the experiences of women guerrillas and the question of rape' (2004: 260). Indeed, *Flame* came at a timely moment as it was released during a time when ex-guerrilla fighters in Zimbabwe 'were demanding compensation for their war roles' (Lyons, 2004: 253). At this time, women's voices were even more silenced because registering as an ex-combatant was dependent on being recognised by a commander, usually male (ibid.). Women ex-combatants were therefore not likely 'to speak out about their experiences of war publicly, if this meant speaking out against

these same men' (ibid.). Additionally, the film encouraged the re-evaluation of the significance of women guerrilla fighters at a time when being an ex-combatant had, for women, become 'something to hide rather than something to celebrate' (Barnes, 2007: 250).¹⁰¹ If the film does not effectively represent the violence that women suffered in military camps during the war, it succeeds in creating 'debate and dialogue in Zimbabwe' (Lyons, 2004: 273).

Postcolonial Disillusionment

Flame represents Zimbabwean women's "postcolonial betrayal" not just as a postcolonial experience but a continuation of the inequality that girls and women suffered within the patriarchal nationalist armies they joined during the war.¹⁰² At the time the film was made, 'there were only twenty-one women out of 150 parliamentarians: three women out of sixteen ministers: and eight women out of sixty-seven city councillors' (Lyons, 2004: 55-56). The post-independence euphoria was wearing off due to contradictions in people's experiences, and some women were vocal in expressing their discontent. An example of such women is Margaret Dongo, who became 'the first female and independent member of Parliament (for Harare South) in Zimbabwe' (Lyons, 2004: 117). Dongo also helped in establishing the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veteran's Association (ZNLWVA) (ibid.).

Teresa Barnes notes that 'the historiographical moment of the production of *Flame*' was characterised by the revisiting of the Zimbabwe liberation war by analysts such as Norma

¹⁰¹ Women ex-combatants were widely labelled "prostitutes," a term that Teresa Barnes states was used as 'the catch-all category for women who challenge social norms' (2007: 250).

¹⁰² Bhebe and Ranger have however argued that 'the war time experience of women was so varied and contradictory that no simple discontinuities or continuities can be discerned' (1996: 28). Bhebe and Ranger describe the post-independence state of gender relations as 'confused and contradictory' (ibid.).

Kruger (2007: 251). Kruger (1992) challenged the mainstream nationalist narrative and argued for the idea that coercion was a significant factor in rural mobilisation during the war. Thus, *Flame* was part of an emerging discourse that was challenging the mainstream historiography.

The experiences that the film explores would not have been possible to represent in the early postcolonial period when postcolonial ideals still hold great sway. With postcolonial disillusionment setting in, it can be said that Ingrid Sinclair found the perfect moment to broach the subject of women's concerns both during and after the war. The film demonstrates that 'the alleged gains made by women during the struggle,' in terms of equality with men, were not sustained or 'transferred into public policy' after independence (Lyons, 2004: Xix).¹⁰³ As such, the timing of the film is very significant in exploring its representations of girl soldiers.

Political mobilisation during the war had led many Zimbabweans to expect significant socio-political and economic changes, including 'a radical redistribution of land and decentralisation of political power,' but the post war realities fell short of this rhetoric (Alexander, 1996: 175). Many women felt betrayed by their postcolonial experiences. For instance, Getrude Moyo, a former girl soldier, mentions in an interview that during the war they had been promised jobs and houses, among many things, which they did not get after the

¹⁰³ "Alleged gains" because, as shall be discussed later, some of the publicised gains may have just been an illusion or a political gimmick. Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi argues that the view that women achieved emancipation during the war was 'insecurely based' and 'depended on statements by a few elite spokesmen and women' (2000: Xx).

war ended (Moyo in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 38).¹⁰⁴ In fact, Getrude Moyo feels that those who had not gone to war were better off because some of them had managed to get educated and now had better paying jobs, unlike the former combatants (ibid.: 39). In another interview, Prudence Uriri says that the end of the war saw the replacement of one regime ‘with another similar regime’ (Uriri in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 93). And Margaret Dongo says that those who were in leadership positions during the nationalist struggle are the ones who reaped the rewards while the rest of ‘the fighters are still languishing in poverty in the rural areas’ (Dongo in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 127). The former fighters also did not get the socialist government that they had expected (Mavis Ntathi in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 148).

Flame was therefore in a position where it could potentially provide a much bigger platform to challenge dominant ideas about Zimbabwe’s “democracy.” And the controversy surrounding its production and release provided the much-needed publicity (Barnes, 2007; Lyons, 2004), as well as a way of discussing issues that the filmmakers could not deal with in the film due to censorship and also due to the fact that the film had to be a development film aimed at specific political goals.¹⁰⁵

Responses to the Film

The film received contradictory responses from the two main “opposing” camps in the film’s controversial reception: the ruling elite and patriarchs on one side, and on the other side the

¹⁰⁴ In the interview, Moyo says she joined the war at the age of fourteen (*Women of Resilience: The Voices of Women Ex-combatants*, 2000: 18).

¹⁰⁵ After about a year and a half of debating the film’s credibility, *Flame* was able to attract a huge audience when it was finally screened in Harare in August 1996. The film ‘broke the box office records for a Zimbabwean film screened in the country’ (Lyons, 2004: 270).

counter-hegemonic group made up of feminists, some former girl soldiers and other disillusioned members of the population. Some ex-combatants, mostly men, demonstrated against what they saw as ‘the film’s spectacular representation of excessive violence committed on female guerrillas by male guerrillas’ (Rwafa, 2011: 47). It should be noted here that some former girl fighters were also opposed to the portrayals in the film. For instance, in an interview, a former girl soldier, Mavis Ntathi (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 153) said:

I honestly, personally do not think it’s okay [for *Flame* to be screened]. Maybe there were some who were subjected to those conditions, I do not know. But personally, in all the camps that I stayed, I never experienced or witnessed anybody who was sexually harassed. I am not saying this to set an image for myself. No, I am saying the truth. I know I never witnessed that.

However, Tanya Lyons suggests that such opinions may have been a symptom of hegemony at work when she says that some women ex-combatants simply followed the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWVA)’s political line and ‘said that *Flame* was a terrible portrayal of the war’ even without having seen the film (2004: 269). But to simply credit views such as that of Ntathi to the power of hegemony would on some level deny women such as her their agency. For instance, Ntathi’s statement indicates that she objects to what she sees as the film’s treatment of one experience among many as “the” girl soldier experience because her own experience was different. Prudence Uriri mentions that some male soldiers entered into consensual relationships with the female soldiers (Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 74), but the film precludes this possibility. The attraction between Florence and Danger, whom she meets while still in her village, is shattered when Danger

sees Florence coming out of Che's room early in the morning after having spent the night there. Additionally, although the girl fighters lived under harsh conditions, the military camps were not made up of consistently horrible experiences. As Mavis Ntathi (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 145) implies in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, the girls also experienced some happy moments.

In *Flame*, Florence is only described as truly happy at the birth of her son, Hondo. Nyasha's voice over states that 'for a while in the mothers' camp, the struggle was over.' This is despite the fact that many former women fighters have stated that the mothers' camp was the last place many women wanted to be. When women in the camps became pregnant or had babies, they 'became a problem for the struggle' (Lyons, 2004: 151), and were treated accordingly. In Mozambique, which is where the military camp in the film is located, mothers were sent to Osibisa camp. According to one of the women leaders who handled women's affairs in the military camps in Mozambique, Mrs Zvobgo, women resented living at Osibisa camp (in Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000: 8). The conditions there were harsh, and also, after being sent there, it was very difficult to get out; the women could no longer be soldiers (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000: 70). And not getting pregnant was not really a choice for many women because use of contraceptives was prohibited (Dongo in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 125).

The link between motherhood and happiness may be seen as an attempt to define Florence's role as an African woman within what Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter calls 'a womanist epistemology that recognizes allegiance to traditional heritage and to women's emancipation' (1996: 231). This approach to African feminism that valued motherhood had gained popularity in the 1990s (Mikell, 1995).

Regardless, the voices of those who felt the film is more aligned to women and girls' experiences in Zimbabwe's liberation war are significant because they represent a challenge to the status quo. Even more significant are those voices that expressed the opinion that the film was rather a watered-down version of female fighters' unfavourable experiences during the war. An example is Sada Niang who argues that the film's 'portrayal of female characters lacks the forcefulness needed to retell history from a female perspective' (1999: 210). Margaret Dongo says, 'from what I have heard, the film does not have much. I wish it had portrayed exactly what happened' (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 127). Freedom Nyamubaya notes that in the sequence that portrays Florence and Nyasha's journey from their village to Mozambique, the girls are still clean after walking for three days (in Lyons, 2004: 255). In this instance, the film sanitises this experience by not showing 'the grime or weariness of the women after such a long journey' (ibid.). It is difficult to figure out why the representation of the journey was sanitised, but perhaps it was to emphasise that real problems started once the girls were in the army.

Opinions that emphasise that the filmmakers should have done more to portray the difficulties faced by women during the war are important because they indicate that although the film was based on oral histories, some significant experiences were left out. This might point to the idea that censorship silenced girl soldiers' voices by inhibiting the representation of some of their experiences. The fact that some of these opinions came from former girl soldiers becomes significant in this regard.

In many of the purely negative and/or patriarchal objections to the film, there is a sense that responses to the film would have been different had it been about the heroic experiences of

boys or men, or perhaps the heroic acts of girls or women but within their traditional roles such as cooking for the guerrillas. For example, the ZNLWVA argued that scenes shown in the film of Florence/Flame shooting at the enemy were a 'gross misrepresentation of the war efforts' because they depicted 'women in actual combat when their role was [*only*] to carry war equipment and ammunition as well as assist in other crucial duties' (*The Sunday Mail* in Lyons, 2004: 163). An example of such a scene is when Flame is told by her commander that they should not attack a truck full of soldiers that is passing by because the soldiers are too many. She then notices a jeep following the truck, with only two soldiers, and runs down a rocky escapement with her rocket gun. She stands right in front of the truck and, in a close-up shot that emphasises her determination, fires a rocket propelled grenade.

Some women ex-combatants involved with the ZNLWVA corroborated the view that women were not involved in combat (Lyons, 2004: 163). According to Lyons, after having mentioned that large numbers of women were involved in combat on the front lines, Joyce "Teurai Ropa" Mujuru later recanted the claim and explained that 'it was expedient to promote the idea to Western solidarity groups that women were involved in the major strikes against Rhodesia, rather than try to explain the importance of women's supportive roles to men's actions' (2004: 167). Promoting women's emancipation resulted in extra funding and support for the nationalist struggle from international sources (Lyons, 2004: 168). According to Lyons, Mujuru further explained that the few women who went to the front 'were mainly found in the liberated zones inside Zimbabwe' (Lyons, 2004: 167). The image of the woman guerrilla fighter is also compromised by revelations such as the one in which Joyce "Teurai Ropa" Mujuru, who 'during and after the war ... glowed in the international spotlight as a heroine of the liberation war,' admits that she was never involved in combat activities inside Zimbabwe (Lyons, 2004: 111-112). Her main role was to 'coordinate ZANU's Department of

Women's Affairs in Mozambique' (Lyons, 2004: 112). But other women ex-combatants have said they were involved in combat on the frontlines (Lyons, 2004: 167). Freedom Nyamubaya is one such woman. She is said to have commanded some combat operations in Rhodesia between 1977 and 1979 (ibid.). In February 1978, another woman combatant, Rudo Hondo, was in command of thirty female guerrillas in Rhodesia's Manica Province where she is said to have brought down a helicopter during an attack by Rhodesian forces (Lyons, 2004: 164).

Despite the filmmakers' earlier mentioned claim that their film is mainly about friendship rather than the politics of the war, *Flame* has largely been interpreted the other way around, with the friendship story forming the backdrop of a narrative about the experiences of women and girls in the liberation struggle. For example, Urther Rwafa states that Ingrid Sinclair, 'aimed to produce a film that would reveal the seamy side of Zimbabwe's liberation war, [...and] sought to symbolically "overthrow" the regimes of heroic images that the armed struggle had monopolised itself' (Rwafa, 2011: 47). Protests from war veterans also indicate that the film is largely considered as political, not only in a historical sense, but in the way it links to postcolonial politics.

However, although the political elites had some rather fanatical reasons for criticising *Flame*, the film has some problematic forms of representation that, to some extent, silences the voices of girl soldiers. For instance, it begins by providing a strong link between its own narrative and historical reality, but then goes on to over simplify its narrative into clearly defined binaries that overlook the complexities of war experiences. Examples of such binaries are the gendered ones discussed earlier in the chapter, and the ones created in relation to the two main characters, Florence and Nyasha.

Certain Types of Girls

Flame begins by providing a strong link between its narrative and reality. It opens with a brief summary of Zimbabwe's colonial history through Nyasha's voice. This brief history is accompanied by archival photographs. After the opening titles, the story of Florence and Nyasha begins with what appears to be a self-reflexive moment for the film, which foregrounds its reliance on historical memory. A hand, which is later revealed as belonging to Florence, flips through some old photographs.

Within the film's diegesis, the photographs provide material evidence of the historical past. They make history accessible to those in the present, such as Florence's daughter, who sees the photographs as evidence that her mother was young when she fought in the war. Although it is clearly not meant to be a documentary, the film functions in a similar way by making the experiences of girl soldiers during the war accessible through visual means.

The filmmakers' claim that the film is mainly about friendship rather than the gendered politics of war is clearly undermined by the fact that the story of Nyasha and Florence begins with an image of Florence holding a gun above her head with one hand, and not an image of the two friends. The image of the two friends is the last one to be revealed, and provides a symbolic link between past and present. The image depicted in the photograph is from the past, but at the back of the photograph is written Nyasha's current address, which Florence asks her daughter to read out loud. The address locates Nyasha in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city, as opposed to Florence's rural space.

With Florence living in poverty in the rural areas and Nyasha working in the city, the film establishes that the experiences of women who were former girl fighters are varied. This is in line with Ngwabi Bhebe and Terence Ranger's view that 'the "spaces" opened by the war for women have been closed for some but not for all' (1996: 28). However, in a strategy that highly simplifies the experiences of former girl soldiers, *Flame* splits the two women into the binaries urban/rural, educated/uneducated and well-off/poor. And, because these experiences are split between two women, the film gives a disproportionate representation of former girl fighters who are living comfortably and those who are in poverty.

Additionally, the two women's post-war circumstances seem to be a continuation of the path the two had taken before they even went to war. In a flashback to the past, Nyasha is introduced as a school pupil interested in getting an education, whereas Florence no longer goes to school despite being of school going age. Nyasha is wearing a school uniform and holding a pen and paper whereas Florence has a mirror in her hand. Nyasha dreams of getting an education and leaving the village for the city, but Florence's dream is to find a man who can marry and look after her. After the war, Florence achieves her childhood dream of marrying a village man, and goes back to being a peasant, while Nyasha gets an education and becomes a working city woman.

The theme of Florence's reliance on men, and Nyasha's disapproval thereof, runs throughout the film. Florence's decision to join the war is partly because of one of the male freedom fighters, Danger. When her relationship with Danger ends she attaches herself to Che. After Che's death, she goes back to Danger, whom she marries at the end of the war. Also, when Che dies, Florence inherits his gun and is promoted to detachment commander by her male

superior.¹⁰⁶ Making Florence a certain type of girl raises the question of whether we should blame her for the situation she finds herself in after the war. She clearly is not as ambitious as Nyasha. Indeed, when Florence reconnects with Nyasha after the war, Nyasha tells her that to get to where she is, she ‘worked all day, and studied all night,’ suggesting that if Florence had taken a similar approach, perhaps things might have turned out differently for her. Nyasha, who was not involved in combat, is better off in postcolonial Zimbabwe than Florence, who attained the position of detachment commander in the war. When Florence approaches the commander who had promoted her to detachment commander during the war and asks for a job, the man tells her that she needs educational qualifications. As far as preparing for the future is concerned, Florence clearly took the wrong path.

However, Florence’s representation can be regarded as Nyasha’s subjective view because the story is told from her perspective. Tanya Lyons argues that privileging the voices of women who participated in the war ‘above standard historical accounts of the war reveals a feminist historical account dissimilar to the latter’ (2004: Xxii). However, in the case of *Flame*, using the voice of the relatively educated adult Nyasha to narrate Florence’s story has the effect of presenting the story from a middle-class perspective. The effect of this subjectivity is that the voice of the rural and uneducated poor girl and woman is silenced in favour of the voice of the educated urban woman. When speaking about representations of child soldiers, Honwana notes that the difficulty in getting a fuller view of their experiences is exacerbated by the fact that ‘only the survivors can tell their stories’ (Honwana, 2006: 50). But, although Florence is a survivor, she still is not the one who tells her story.

¹⁰⁶ This is nearly the same situation as in *Sarafina!*, in which Sarafina plays Mandela in the school play after the other competitor for the role, Crocodile, dies.

Additionally, hearing the story from Nyasha gives some of Florence's combat experiences in the war mythological proportions.¹⁰⁷ Although history may play a significant role in the construction of myths, a myth is not synonymous with history (Bell, 2003: 77). Thus, the narration of Florence's story by Nyasha gives the impression that the story is constructed to serve the interests of its creators rather than to give the girl soldiers represented by Florence a voice.

Despite these limitations, the representations of the two girls provide some insights into some of the questions that are central to the research on girl soldiers. Such questions include why girls join the war and what their war experiences are.

Why Girls Joined the War

Flame does not provide just one reason for why Florence joins the war. Instead, it provides layered experiences that eventually reach a tipping point with the arrest of Florence's father. These experiences range from general political conscientisation through contact with guerrilla fighters in the village, to specific triggers.

Contact with Guerrilla Fighters

Before she joins the war, Florence is portrayed as relatively politically conscious. In the village, Florence, together with her mother, is involved in providing the guerrilla fighters with food. When her father asks her why she is getting involved, Florence responds by saying that it is because the guerrillas are their brothers. The father is clearly concerned about her daughter associating with the male guerrillas, whom he says only want 'one thing' from his

¹⁰⁷ A myth can be defined as 'an exaggerated or idealized conception of a person or thing' (Oxford Dictionary, 2017).

daughter, implying that they only see Florence as a sexual being. It seems the father is presented as simply imposing his patriarchal authority, but, as Nhongo-Simbanegavi notes, ‘the presence of young, armed men’ in villages posed a real threat for women and girls (2000: 10). Kanhema-Blinston explains that whenever the guerrilla fighters were in vulnerable positions within villages, they would take young civilians hostage, including girls (2013: 82). They assumed that this would provide a measure of security because if the villagers betrayed them to the Rhodesian security forces, they would also risk their children (ibid.). Girls were particularly vulnerable in these situations as they were sometimes sexually abused (Kanhema-Blinston, 2013: 85).

Florence tells her father that everyone is joining the guerrillas, which gives the impression that she sees the anti-colonial war as a popular struggle, but also reflects some element of peer pressure. Norma J. Kriger points out that many people had little choice but to ‘provide logistical support for the guerrillas’ because anyone who refused to do so would risk personal physical harm (1992: 154). However, Kriger concludes that ‘based on what youth themselves said and did, and how *parents* and the elite described them,’ young people generally ‘provided the enthusiastic guerrilla supporters’ (1992: 168).¹⁰⁸ The interaction between Florence and her parents display the different positions that girls and adult women occupied. Florence’s mother is characterised by an anxiety that comes from having a much clearer view of the war-time political landscape, whereas Florence, partly because as a child she does not have to worry about keeping the family safe, seems to have an idealised view of the war. In her representation, Sinclair is therefore mindful of the intersection between gender and age.

¹⁰⁸ Emphasis in original source.

In an effort to convince Florence's father to let them go, the mother informs him that she is worried that if they do not help to feed the comrades, people might think they are against the struggle, which could have serious consequences for her family. Kanhema-Blinston states that although it was dangerous to take any side during the war, some people chose to ally themselves with the guerrillas because if they were reported to the Rhodesian authorities they would be arrested, whereas displeasing the guerrillas would result in 'instant justice' (2013: 82). Kanhema-Blinston gives an example of her teacher's father whom people said was killed by the comrades after her sister identified him as a sell-out (2013: 89-90). Perhaps Florence's mother evokes the family's safety because she knows it is the only way to make sure her husband, who is not keen on the idea, allows her to provide food to the guerrillas. But it is also possible that this particular scenario may have been Sinclair's way of subtly suggesting that the guerrillas used a combination of both coercion and persuasion to garner support for the liberation war, as opposed to simply providing an idealised view of the struggle. In her study, Kriger found that parents or adults were often coerced into contributing resources to the war (1992: 155).

When the women and girls take food to the guerrillas, the villagers, including men, are then subjected to a session of "political education." The fighters mention grievances that the villagers can relate to: land dispossession, limited access to other natural resources, poverty, and limited opportunities for the youths. Florence is clearly convinced that the war is justified. But, in line with emphasising the experiences of girls and not adult women, Sinclair adds something that is mostly common to the young: a new love interest. One of the comrades, Danger, walks over to Florence and says to her 'I want to see you, later.'

There is something uncomfortable about the way Danger approaches Florence. He does not ask, he simply informs her that he wants to see her later. When narrating her story, Maureen Moyo mentions that when guerrilla fighters came to their village, girls were expected to spend the night with the guerrillas, providing “entertainment” (in *Zimbabwe Women Writers*, 2000: 164). Although such entertainment did not always include sexual intercourse, it often involved other sexual components such as being touched and kissed. Maureen Moyo states that although comrades would claim that they ‘[do not] have sex with the children, the girls,’ but ‘only kiss them and touch their breasts,’ some girls ended up getting pregnant from these interactions (Maureen Moyo in *Zimbabwe Women Writers*, 2000: 165). Maureen Moyo notes that this issue particularly affected girls because, although there is homosexuality, comrades never took boys to sleep with them (in *Zimbabwe Women Writers*, 2000: 171-172).¹⁰⁹

With the way that Danger speaks to Florence, it is not clear if Florence has a choice in the matter, but she sneaks off from her home during the night to go and meet with Danger like a delinquent teenager off to a secret romantic meeting. The meeting is indeed presented as a romantic scene with a two shot of Danger and Florence and a crackling fire in the background. The meeting ends with Danger giving Florence his bangle, which makes her very happy. What is perhaps significant about this scene is that Danger plants the idea about joining the war into Florence’s head. Danger invites Florence to join his unit and leave the village. He tells her that she should be the one to decide what she wants, thus contrasting Florence’s father who attempts to control even what Florence wears. Joining the war

¹⁰⁹ It should be noted that it is difficult to state with absolute certainty that boys were never “taken” because the stigma associated with homosexuality may inhibit men to reveal that they were involved in any forms of sexual conduct with the male soldiers. Patricia A. Maulden notes that the ‘feminisation of rape victims’ and the perception that the boys who are raped must also be homosexual may limit male rape victims from talking about their experiences (2011: 69). This makes the sexual abuse of boys by men ‘even more invisible than the use of girls’ in wars (Mazurana et al., 2002: 109).

therefore promises Florence a certain amount of freedom that she does not enjoy at home. And yet, the promise of a progressive space for women in the war is contradicted by Danger's earlier approach when he tells Florence that he wants to see her. This suggests that while girl soldiers were encouraged to be liberated, male privilege was not exactly addressed. As shall be discussed later, the film tries to expose such privilege and its effect on the experiences of girl soldiers.

“Push” and “Pull” Factors

The film sets up a combination of factors for why girls chose to join the war. It provides both of what Özerdem and Podder (2011) refer to as “push” and “pull” factors that cause children to join the war. It is interesting to note that many of the reasons reflected in *Flame* are similar to those from the real-life stories articulated by various women in the book *Women of Resilience: The Voices of Women Ex-combatants*, published by Zimbabwe Women Writers in 2000. For example, Prudence Uriri's story is very similar to Florence's. Just like Florence, Uriri decided to join the war after her father had been arrested for political reasons (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 60). Although breaking her father out of prison was her main motive, Uriri also mentions that she was fascinated with being a fighter and carrying a gun (ibid.: 61). We see Florence's fascination with guns in the scene when she and Nyasha are on their way to Mozambique and she picks up a stick and starts shooting, pretending it is a gun. Just like Florence, Uriri's mother was involved in cooking food for the comrades (ibid.).

Maurine Moyo mentions that some people joined the war because others were doing so (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 161). We see that in Nyasha who joins the war mostly because of the peer pressure from Florence. Also, knowing that Nyasha is set on getting

educated, Florence uses the possibility of getting scholarships at the military camps as a means of convincing Nyasha to go with her. This echoes the story of Nhamo who joined the war at age sixteen after one of her girlfriends informed her that nationalist forces were sending some people to be educated in countries like Zambia, Mozambique and even overseas (Lyons, 2004: 109). These similarities make a strong case for suggesting that the film is based on former girl soldiers' oral histories. Sinclair also stated that although the film is fictional, it is based on extensive interviews with former girl and woman soldiers (Lyons, 2004: 257). In fact, the project was originally a documentary but the women were not willing to appear in it 'because of the extremities of their experiences,' and because of the stigma associated with being a former guerrilla (Lyons, 2004: 257). Teresa Barnes adds that 'there is really no reason to differentiate between *Flame* as a film and as a piece of conventional historiography' (2007: 244).

Oral testimonies are indeed 'important tools for digging up and putting together the remains of almost forgotten pasts' (Helff, 2015: 3). This is especially so for women because 'historical writing has diminished or excluded [their] lives and history' (Lyons, 2004: 9). Lyons notes that 'women ex-combatants have been associated with the characteristics ascribed to them through the process of representation,' and the representations 'have accrued a certain degree of power over the actual lives of the women being represented' (2004: 11). Relying on oral histories in telling women's stories can therefore help in avoiding 'the dilemma of colonising African women's voices' (Lyons, 2004: 9). But adapting people's recollections into film comes with its own problems (Helff, 2015: 3). Lyons states that Sinclair used fiction to protect the identities and realities of those involved, while still promoting 'a reality that was experienced by many people' (2004: 257). Echoing Lyons' opinion, Niang states that Sinclair creates a film which 'is a gendered critique of nationalism

that claims to be a prototype encompassing various similar experiences of women within nationalist struggles' (Niang, 1999: 209). However, by combining the experiences of many girls and women into a few characters, the film runs the risk of creating a form of hyperreality which distorts the voices of those it seeks to represent.¹¹⁰ In the film, there is a tension between trying to represent the collective and the individual, as well as the abstract and the real.

“Volunteering”

While exploring girls' reasons for joining the war, Sinclair complicates what it means to volunteer. Once Florence and Nyasha arrive at the military training camp, it becomes very clear they had no idea what they were getting themselves into when they left home. Upon joining the armed struggle, Florence and Nyasha soon realise that leadership at the camp is male dominated, and military training is only reserved for male soldiers. They find themselves in a predicament in which they are not given the opportunity to become fighters, and yet they are not allowed to leave. This experience echoes some of the testimonies by former girl fighters. For example, Mavis Ntathi mentions that her experience was that after recruitment and training it seems the party did not know what to do with them; they felt as if they were just a burden (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 137). Nancy Saungweme notes how, at one point, out of the 2000 soldiers to be trained in Tanzania, only fifty women were chosen despite the fact that 'the camps had almost equal numbers of men and women' (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 51). Saungweme concludes that 'men felt that they were the real fighters – the ones to lead' (ibid.).

¹¹⁰ Hyperreality can be defined as 'an image or simulation, or an aggregate of images and simulations, that either distorts the reality it purports to depict or does not in fact depict anything with a real existence at all, but which nonetheless comes to constitute reality' (*Collins English Dictionary*, 2017).

Although Mavis Ntathi says she never regretted her decision to join the war (Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 154), many of the other women interviewed in *Women of Resilience: The Voices of Women Ex-combatants* mentioned that war turned out not to be what they had expected. Carine Nyamandwe states that knowing what she knows now, if asked to join the war she would not (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 9). She explains that she was not prepared for the death and sickness she witnessed at the military camp (ibid.: 4). She wanted to go back home but it was too late. Those who joined could not just choose to leave. As Nancy Saungweme explains, anyone caught trying to leave would be killed (ibid.: 50). Sometimes deserters who were caught were tortured (Uriri in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 68).

Gertrude Moyo wishes she ‘had been one of the lucky ones who did not go to the war’ (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 39). Uriri also expresses the general ignorance on which the decision to go to war was based saying, ‘nobody told you of the hardships that we would encounter’ (ibid.: 64). Maurine Moyo echoes the above sentiments stating that they ‘had all sorts of reasons, but basically ... [they] didn’t know enough. [Their] reasons were not good enough’ (ibid.: 161). According to Nhongo-Simbanegavi, Mary Mucheka, a former girl fighter who joined the war at fourteen, later saw ‘the war as an unfortunate experience in which young people were duped or coaxed to participate’ (2000: 33). Nhongo-Simbanegavi concludes that young girls ‘rarely held any political opinions prior to recruitment and may have ventured out to the war out of curiosity’ (2000: 26). This can be contrasted to older women whose decision to join the war ‘was largely shaped by the nature of the hardships

they had already faced in life' (ibid.).¹¹¹ However, some of the girls had witnessed the brutality of Rhodesian soldiers and therefore had "good" reasons for joining the war (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000: 30).

Thus, *Flame* echoes many of the voices of former girl soldiers that indicate that much of the political education was only meant to persuade rather than fully inform the would-be soldiers of the difficulties they would face. As a result, those who volunteered to join the war were not well informed. The situation was even worse for girls because they were not prepared for the patriarchal structures through which military life was organised.

Child Abductions and the Anti-Colonial Struggle

A very significant omission in the film's accounts is abduction. Abducting children and forcing them to become soldiers is something that is often spoken of in relation to postcolonial wars, but not anti-colonial wars. But during the Zimbabwean liberation struggle, some child soldiers, including girls, were abducted and forced to join the war. Fay Chung states that in the 1960s and early 1970s 'both ZANU and ZAPU engaged in a policy of forced conscription in Zambia' because there was a 'lack of volunteers from inside the country' (1996: 139). Getrude Moyo gives an account of how at the age of fourteen she and other school children were abducted while waiting for the bus to take them to school (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 15).¹¹² More children, between ten to twelve years old were also

¹¹¹ Such reasons depended on the women's background and social positions. For example, illiterate women 'from peasant backgrounds were more likely to' be motivated by 'the injustices of colonial land policies,' whereas relatively educated women would likely have grievances such as 'lack of education and job opportunities' (Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 2000: 26).

¹¹² Moyo indicates that the children were not subjected to military training because 'they chose older people. ... They would just look at you and just estimate that you might be eighteen' (in

brought in to join her group (ibid: 17). Joyce Sithabile Ndlovu also indicates that guerrilla fighters came to the school where she worked and forced them to join the war (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 101). According to Tanya Lyons, ‘in January 1977, ZIPRA guerrillas took children from Manama Mission School and marched them to Botswana at gunpoint’ (2004: 109). The Rhodesians sent the children’s parents to Botswana to get them back, but many of them refused to come back because they had been convinced of the importance of the struggle through political education (ibid.). However, as Kriger notes, sometimes coercion was ‘mistaken for politicisation’ (1992: 153).

Political Education and Women’s Emancipation

Political education was indeed useful for creating political consciousness among the recruits (Ntathi in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 136). In military camps, political education was designed to ‘systematically conscienti[se] students against suppressive and exploitative types of ruling systems’ (Nare, 1996: 134). Maureen Moyo says that young people did not fully understand that they were oppressed until they were educated by the comrades; oppression was for them a normal condition (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 162). Freedom Nyamubaya is said to have admitted that she only ‘gained an appreciation of the struggle’ after she had received political education (Lyons, 2004: 114). Nyamubaya said she joined the war partly because she wanted to get a gun and kill her headmaster who had denied her a scholarship (ibid.).

Political education was also very important during recruitment processes. Lyons states that in order to secure women’s active support in the Zimbabwe liberation war, nationalists taught

Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 20). However, this does not really sanitise the image of the nationalist military organisations because the definition of child soldier includes non-combat roles.

women that they were doubly exploited through colonialism and patriarchy (2004: 44). But, according to Nare, in the military camps ‘human survival and the need to liberate Zimbabwe were placed at the top of [the] educational priorities.’ It seems therefore that gender sensitive education was prioritised only during recruitment. The education in military camps lacked in its attention to gender equality. Chiedza Musengezi and Irene McCartney note that the ‘liberation armies professed to be gender aware, and to promote equality between the sexes, but practise lagged far behind theory’ (2000: xii). The issue of women’s emancipation was mostly discussed among the educated elite and rarely among the rank and file (Lyons, 2004: 50). Thus, because girls largely belonged to the rank and file category, their conscientisation excluded gender issues.

Tanya Lyons states that ‘the rhetoric of women’s emancipation ... entered the discourse of nationalism in the mid to late 1970s, encouraging women to see the potential for their own liberation within nationalism’ (2004: 44). *Flame* is set in the period from the mid to late 1970s. This probably explains why Danger tells Florence that she has to make her own decision on whether to join the war or not, rather than ask for permission.

The prioritisation of national liberation over women’s emancipation had a lasting effect on postcolonial Zimbabwe as women found it difficult to break through the patriarchal structures and assert themselves as capable political leaders. *Flame* attempts to reclaim women’s political legitimacy by placing girl fighters squarely within the history of the anti-colonial struggle.¹¹³

¹¹³ A person or an entity is said to have political legitimacy if they are ‘morally justified in wielding political power’ (Buchanan, 2002: 689).

Women and their Political Legitimacy

Flame uses gender-sensitive lenses to view the general discontent among the Zimbabwean people and make a claim for women's political legitimacy. According to V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan, gender-sensitive lenses 'enable ... us to "see" how the world is shaped by gendered concepts, practices, and institutions' (in Lyons, 2004: 20). In the dominant constructions of history, women ex-combatants were forced back into the stereotypical traditional domestic roles for women through 'media portrayals and public monuments' (ibid.: 222). For instance, the designers of the Statue of the Unknown Soldier at the Heroes Acre 'sculpted the woman wearing a skirt,' although female soldiers were known to wear trousers during the war (ibid.: 221).¹¹⁴ One commentator on the statue offered the opinion that putting the woman in a skirt ensured that she would be easily recognisable as a woman (ibid.). However, it should be noted that women fighters returned from war to an environment where a woman wearing a pair of trousers signified that she may be a "prostitute" or "too liberated" (ibid.). Additionally, rehabilitation for female ex-combatants focussed on reintegrating them into 'traditionally gender-specific, acceptable roles for women' (ibid.: 229). The returning women fighters were taught domestic skills such as crocheting, 'instead of being groomed for more public roles' (ibid.: 228).

Flame's legitimacy claim seems to echo Mary Ann Tétreault's assertion that 'autonomous female participation in revolutions underlies the legitimacy of postrevolutionary demands for women's liberation' (in Lyons, 2004: 22). In that regard, the film emphasises girl and woman soldiers' heroic acts during the war. A woman fighting with a gun becomes 'an "equal citizen" of the nation' (Lyons, 2004: 168). But some feminists, academics and writers regard such glorification of women as soldiers in war situations as problematic. For example,

¹¹⁴ It should be noted once again that female fighters in the Zimbabwe liberation war are often referred to as women, without differentiating girls from women.

Chiedza Musengezi and Irene McCartney argue that ‘the contribution that women made in the camps is often not acknowledged or is diminished in favour of the soldier, the fighter’ (2000: xii). This is problematic because despite the fact that many women ‘were trained for combat, it was only a very small proportion of women who actually went to the front’ (ibid.). Some women were undertakers, medical assistants, and carriers of ammunition (Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000). Getrude Moyo, a former girl soldier with the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU), explains that in ZAPU camps ‘women did not go to the front,’ but defended the camps, including refugee camps, a role which also included shooting and killing the enemy when the camps were attacked (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 41). Some of the non-combat roles therefore involved very high levels of danger and difficulty. Margaret Dongo argues that carrying ammunition ‘was actually heavier than instituting the war itself, actually shooting,’ because they had to carry the extremely heavy supplies and, on top of that, a gun for their protection (ibid.: 127-128). Dongo also states that although women’s roles were mostly performed in camps, this was actually a disadvantage because camps suffered heavy attacks and those in the camps had to defend their base (ibid.: 128). Thus, the glorification of the woman who wields a gun and fights in the front has the effect of obscuring ‘the roles and experiences and silenc[ing] the voices of the thousands of young girls and women who were involved in the struggle for independence’ (Lyons, 2004: Xix).

A political legitimacy claim based on the idea that women were also combat soldiers seems to rely on a few “exceptional” women who managed to prove they could “be like men.” This view takes on a masculinised definition of what it means to “fight” in a war, with the implication that women who attain leadership roles have to do so on male terms. This reinforces the wartime practices in which women had to be as “tough” as men in order to attain leadership positions (Musengezi and McCartney, 2000: xiii). Nancy Saungweme

suggests that the reason why some women would beat up young recruits may have been that ‘they so much wanted to be like men, to be tough and cruel like them’ (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 52).¹¹⁵

When discussing the Eritrean War of Independence, which was fought against the Ethiopian government, Victoria Bernal argues that the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) constructed gender equality ‘in part through the erasure of the feminine’ (2001: 135). This idea can also be applied to the Zimbabwe liberation war. Maureen Moyo, a former girl soldier, states that when they put on the uniform and carried the gun, they felt like men (in Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 159). Speaking about her experience as a girl soldier, Nancy Saungweme (*ibid.*: 51) says:

I stopped menstruating and so did the other women. We were just like men. We were pleased because we thought it was macho. We wanted to be identified as fighters, as men.

Bernal suggests that the construction of women ‘as not only equal to men but as male equivalents’ results in the suppression of ‘some profound issues of gender relations’ (2001: 135). In this situation, women are constructed ‘in men’s image’ (*ibid.*: 136). Thus, instead of attaining the transformation of gender relations, the conditions under which women participated as soldiers in the liberation war meant that some female identities were repressed and rendered invisible (*ibid.*). Repressing female identities had significant implications. Tanya Lyons argues that by glorifying women and portraying them as equally involved as

¹¹⁵ It should be noted that this is a stereotypical characterisation of men. Not all men are tough and/or cruel.

men, nationalist movements were able to promote ‘the image of a functional, cohesive, and united nationalist front,’ and hide ‘gendered problems among the rank and file’ (2004: 158).

It should however be noted that the idea of women becoming “like men” reflects the gendered definition of war. As Chris Coulter argues, ‘the very act of fighting, if understood as a male preoccupation, by definition makes women and girls less feminine and extension, ‘unnatural’, and for some, incomprehensible’ (Coulter, 2008: 62). It is clear that *Flame* does not use the “woman with a gun” image to hide gender inequality. The film goes beyond the dominant rhetoric of the “heroic girls” to expose girls’ struggles within the highly patriarchal structures of military organisation. But then, the film singles out one “exceptional” woman at the expense of many. For example, Florence is singled out as defining “the girl hero” in a speech made by one of the commanders at an end-of-war gathering. The commander unceremoniously drags Florence from where she is sitting so that she stands up facing everyone and says:

‘It is women like this, together with you men. We have won this war. Women won this freedom with us. They fought with us. They fed us. They sheltered us. They risked their lives. Let us salute them and give thanks.’

Considering that the contributions of many women who were not involved in combat are already undervalued, this approach of singling out a specific, masculinised type of woman/girl in the definition of “war hero” has significant negative implications. It may lead to the exclusion of many other women in the claim for political legitimacy.

If the film was not rooted so much in the Women in Development discourse, perhaps limiting attention to the plight of those few “exceptional” women who were involved in combat would not have mattered. This is because it might have been one of those films that simply highlight women’s abilities and promote the idea that girls and women can be leaders and can achieve anything they set their minds to, as is the case with, for example, *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012). *The Hunger Games* has an exceptionally skilled girl fighter, but the film does not attempt to link her experiences directly to the real-life experiences of women; the film is more inspirational than revelatory. However, the Women in Development discourse allows *Flame* to stay close to a form of reality that may enable the film to be more relatable to real-life girl soldiers than a fantasy film like *The Hunger Games* might be.

Conclusion

Being the first film to create a fictionalised visual representation of the experiences of girl soldiers in the Zimbabwean Liberation War provided the producers of *Flame* with a huge amount of unused material, but also a huge burden of expectations. The burden of expectations was worsened by the fact that the film was made in an environment characterised by heavy censorship from political elites who wished to maintain their hegemony in the construction of the history of the anti-colonial struggle. Additionally, the filmmakers also had to satisfy the developmental themes demanded by the funders of the project. In a bid to satisfy all these interests, the voices of girl soldiers suffered. Censorship resulted in some experiences being represented in watered down versions, or being removed altogether. Funding demands meant the sacrificing of complex experiences and relations in favour of a “clear” development message. The film also ended up employing generic character types that inhibited explorations of more complex individualised human experiences.

However, the film director, Sinclair, managed to find creative ways of expression that enabled the film to not completely lose the voices of the girl soldiers. These creative ways included, for example, use of symbols and well thought out mise-en-scene and camera movements. But such creative expression demanded an active viewer who was also aware of the references made in the film. As such, some of the ideas were missed by the audience, and responses to the film were not always those that the filmmaker had hoped for. Despite these shortcomings, the film remains significant especially because it drew a lot of attention to itself, which allowed it to create dialog among the Zimbabwean population on issues relating to girls and women's experiences during the war as well as their postcolonial conditions. The film contributed to the efforts of demanding political legitimacy for women in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

The next chapter looks at the representation of girl soldiers in *Heart of Fire* (2008), a film which is directed by Luigi Falorni and inspired by Senait Mehari's memoir. In her book, Mehari wrote about her experiences as a child soldier in Eritrea in the early 1980s. Falorni then took on the challenge of representing those experiences in the visual medium of film. *Heart of Fire* provides for a fascinating study because it explores the experiences of girl soldiers in a rather complex war that combined the characteristics of both a civil and an anti-colonial war.

Chapter Five

‘Still a Girl’: The Girl Soldier and [His]story in *Heart of Fire*

Introduction

It was not only through sexual aggression that the boys tried to show me and the other girls where our place was. As a girl, I was to give way to them in everything and to submit to their every command whenever they wished.

Senait Mehari, 2006: 123

Luigi Falorni's *Heart of Fire* (2008) provides for an illuminating exploration of the silencing of girl soldiers through examining the differences between the film and Senait Mehari's memoir, *Heart of Fire: From Child Soldier to Soul Singer* (2006), which inspired the film. In many ways, the film overlooks the gendered experiences emphasised in the memoir, and focuses mainly on the age aspect of the main character's experiences. That is, emphasis is on defining Awet, the film's main character, just as a child rather than a child who is also a girl. It seems that Awet's role could as easily have been played by a boy, although, visually, the image of the girl soldier adds a certain amount of vulnerability to the character since child soldiers are usually imagined as boys, and girls are stereotyped as weaker and averse to violence. Additionally, the film simplifies the Eritrean war in ways that are reminiscent of the contemporary representations of African postcolonial wars. In this regard, the film constructs an ideal victim not only in the sense that the girl is not responsible for the situation she finds herself in, but also in the sense that she gets caught up in a civil war that is devoid of clear or meaningful political motives.

In examining the differences and similarities between the representations in the film and in the memoir, the aim is not to look at perceived limitations of film (Stam, 2005: 3). Thomas Leitch observes that some people consider novels superior to films because they ‘deal in concepts,’ whereas films deal in percepts (2003: 156). This view, according to Leitch, is derived from George Bluestone's observation that ‘where the moving image comes to us directly through perception, language must be filtered through the screen of conceptual apprehension’ (Bluestone in Leitch, 2003: 156). But, as Leitch rightly argues, filmic narratives invoke visual, auditory, narrative and fictional codes, as well as a rhetoric of figuration (2003: 156). The interpretation and integration of these ‘into the single signifying system of a given film [...] requires as much conceptual initiative and agility as interpreting the verbal (and narrative and fictional and figural) signifying system of a given novel’ (ibid.). Leitch states that ‘the difference between percept and concept may well be more properly a function of rereading’ (ibid.: 158). In that regard, the differences between Mehari’s story and the film’s story are viewed as indicative of these stories’ different ideological influences and interests.

Both the film and Mehari’s memoir were shrouded in controversy. On one side, were Mehari’s supporters, and on the other, were ‘those who deny Eritrean rebels ever used child soldiers’ (Weissberg, 2008: 35). According to Weissberg, the Eritrean government claimed that the liberation parties did not use child soldiers in the war, and put pressure on those involved with the production of the film ‘to bail or face serious repercussions’ (2008: 35). It is however possible that the Eritrean government’s claims were based on the definitions of ‘child’ and ‘soldier’ they chose to adopt. When writing about the mobilisation of young people in the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), Gerard Chaliand, a researcher, puts

their age group between 15 and 18 years (1980: 51). Chaliand also refers to them as ‘younger people,’ not children. Victoria Bernal, an academic, describes the EPLF as a ‘youth culture’ (2001: 139). However, when contextualising the use of child soldiers in the Eritrean War of Independence, Mehari (2006: 63) claims that:

Both the [Eritrean Liberation Front] ELF and the EPLF started training children at eleven years of age but only sent soldiers into action from the age of twelve or thirteen, when they were regarded as young adults in the African culture. By the age of fourteen they were on the frontline.

Mehari also claims that the ELF unit she was handed over to had a majority of soldiers ‘between seven and seventeen years of age, although perhaps only two or three out of the couple of hundred were [her] age’ (2006: 55).¹¹⁶ It is difficult to prove or disprove that girls as young as seven served in the war. Much of the literature about the war only speaks of men and women or teenagers, as does Chaliand’s article mentioned above. There are, however, writers and researchers such as Maneshka Eliatamby (2011) and Victoria Bernal (2000 and 2001), who specifically discuss the participation of women in the war, but still, not girls.

Tom Odhiambo notes that ‘personal testimonies have the potential and capacity to capture the lived moments, the emotions, the feelings, the thoughts, the bodily reactions to a situation’ in ways that ‘third party reporting cannot’ (2009: 51). But, as mentioned in Chapter Two, Mehari has been sued by other former child soldiers for lying in her book, which puts into question the truthfulness of her personal testimony. However, this chapter is not particularly

¹¹⁶ She ‘was six, maybe seven’ when her father handed her over to the ELF (Mehari, 2006: 54).

interested in the veracity of Mehari's story. The story is viewed as representing the way Mehari chooses to construct her history.¹¹⁷

Adapting the Narrator's Voice

At the beginning of the film, Awet speaks of Eritrea's liberation struggle as a war that she used to hear about, but without actually seeing. She says that a sister at the Catholic orphanage where she lived, Anna, told her about 'the brave freedom fighters.' She hopes that her father is a fighter too, not because she fully understands what the war is about, but because it would explain why he left her at the orphanage. In that case, Eritrea's independence would mean she gets to go home. Awet's narration simplifies the war by explaining it through the eyes of a child, but the idea that the war is justified is clearly implied in her statement. Awet's hope for liberation becomes symbolic of the hope of the Eritrean people. Awet's narration is thus linked to the perspective of the Eritrean people. This strategy becomes problematic as the director becomes more creative and significantly veers off from Mehari's narrative which provides greater insights into the War of Independence and the Eritrean people's lived experiences. By linking the film to a personal testimony, and yet veer off from the personal account and the meaning that Mehari attributes to her experiences, the film is able to present a humanitarian narrative masquerading as a personal testimony. The use of the realist mode of representation also blurs the line between documentary and fictional storytelling.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ It should be noted that the idea of choice here is not without limitations. Mehari still needed to consider her readers when writing the book. She also needed to write a book that publishers would be interested in. That is, the book had to attract readers and possibly earn income for the writer and publisher.

¹¹⁸ The film uses a linear narrative and location shooting. It also uses non-professional actors found in an Eritrean refugee camp in Northern Kenya, although that was only because some supporters of the Eritrean government intimidated Falorni's original cast into quitting (Honeycutt, 2008).

Both Mehari and Falorni's stories are presented in the first-person narrative. In the film, Awet speaks in Tigrinya, thus locating the story in a specific region in Africa.¹¹⁹ However, the film distorts Mehari's experience of language use, which is very much linked to her identity as a colonial subject. In her book, Mehari states that when she moved from the state-run orphanage to the Catholic orphanage, she could not immediately fit in because the people there spoke Italian, including the few African children who lived there (2006: 13). When she leaves the orphanage to live with her grandparents, she had to once again relearn her native language, which affected her ability to learn in school (2006: 21). Mehari's experience reflects some of the colonial experiences of many Eritreans. For example, when Ethiopia annexed Eritrea, the Ethiopian government set out to suppress Eritrean languages, forcibly imposing the Amharic language on Eritreans (Houtart, 1980: 92; Davidson, 1980: 14). Houtart states that 'the Ethiopian regime did not even hesitate to burn books written in Tigrinya' (1980: 92). This indicates that the issue of language is a very significant aspect of the colonial experience. However, in the film Awet switches easily from using Italian at the orphanage to speaking her native language. While this might seem a minor issue, it minimizes the effects of Italian colonialism on the Eritrean people's cultural and lived experiences.

Additionally, whereas Mehari's memoir narrates the girl's childhood experiences from an adult's perspective, Falorni's film uses Awet's young voice, which gives the impression of providing direct access to the girl's experiences. While Falorni's strategy may be useful, for instance, in simplifying the narrative, it conceals the fact that although the film represents the

¹¹⁹ The language is spoken in both Eritrea and Ethiopia.

experiences of a child, the narrative is constructed by an adult and therefore also offers, to an extent, an adult's perspective.

Mazurana et al. note that girl soldiers are rarely 'viewed holistically or contextually within armed conflicts, geopolitical and cultural contexts, time periods, countries, or regions' (2002: 100). To an extent, this is what happens in *Heart of Fire*. The film is set in a different era, the 1980s, before African child soldiers had become such a common phenomenon, at least not in the media, but using a child's voice drags the film into the present and gives it a sense of immediacy. As a result, the film becomes a humanitarian project linked to the current child soldier problem rather than simply a representation of the experiences of a girl soldier from more than two decades ago.

A girl soldier's story from many years ago can still be relevant to current experiences, but shaping the story specifically so that it is relevant to current conditions may give the experiences a sense of sameness that overlooks the varying contexts. For example, Eritrea's War of Independence became the first successful secessionist movement in postcolonial Africa (Bereketeab, 2016: 4; Iyob, 1995: 2), but *Heart of Fire*'s emphasis on the 'fratricidal' aspect of the war seems to undermine this historical achievement that complicates the generally negative definition of civil war.¹²⁰

The Gendered Experience of the Girl Soldier

Falorni's *Heart of Fire* does not weave gendered perspectives and experiences into the narrative to the same extent that Senait Mehari's book does. For example, in the film, when Awet's sister, Frewyni, is given a gun, Awet, in a way that a child may experience

¹²⁰ Negative definition of civil war when considered in relation to traditional wars.

separation anxiety or wish to imitate those older than her, immediately tries to get a gun for herself so she can join her sister. But, in her book, Senait Mehari (2006: 66) explains that when her sister was given a gun, she struggled to reconcile the image of her sister in domestic spaces, performing domestic chores as she did at home, with that of her holding a gun. Thus, the book emphasises the idea that the main character sees and experiences the world in gendered terms.

In the film, to a larger extent, girls are treated in the same way as boys. If it were not for the fact that all the cooks are women, the military camp would have been a gender equality utopia, unlike the camp in *Flame*, where women are, at first, simply ignored and left without training and food. But, in her memoir, Mehari speaks of the unequal power between men and women in the group. For example, she mentions that ‘men were in ultimate command’ (2006: 55). Only one woman, Agawegahta, was among the top commanders, many were only middle-ranking leaders (ibid.). Senait, as Mehari refers to herself in the book, finds a role model in Agawegahta, and it is clear that she is hugely impressed by the fact that Agawegahta manages to reach higher levels of authority despite being a woman. In an examination of the structure of the EPLF, Victoria Bernal came to the conclusion that ‘women served in EPLF alongside men in all capacities except the top ranks of leadership’ (2001: 133). Thus, within military organisations, it was rare for a woman to be in the highest ranks. When speaking about the highest-ranking leaders in the military camp, Mehari mentions Agawegahta and says: ‘I regarded her as the most important of them all, for she was the only woman among the leaders’ (Mehari, 2006: 89). Mehari emphasises the significance of the fact that she was able to find a female role model in such a high rank. This becomes even more significant when considering that in societies such as those in Eritrea women were largely excluded from public and economic life (Houtart, 1980: 7, Eliatamby, 2011: 41).

Mehari also ponders on what it meant to be a high-ranking female leader in the military unit. In that regard, she echoes Musengezi and McCartney's (2000: xiii) idea¹²¹ that women needed to be as tough as men in order to attain leadership positions. Mehari writes that Agawegahta 'had paid a price for the position she had achieved as a woman – she was just as cruel as the men, if not a touch crueler' (2006: 124). In demonstrating this, Mehari writes about how Agawegahta was the one who ordered the execution of some boy soldiers who were accused of selling their guns (Mehari, 2006: 102). Describing Agawegahta as 'just as cruel as the men' implies that she had to suppress her feminine side in order to be considered seriously as a capable leader. Eliatamby argues that just like women in many other 'resistance movements such as the Sri Lankan LTTE, Eritrean women, too, appear to have adopted heightened levels of violence in order to prove their equality on the battlefield' (2011: 42). However, Chris Coulter points out that the 'idea that female combatants are more evil and vicious than men is often attributed by researchers to female fighters' transgression of acceptable female behaviour' (2008: 63). Thus, Agawegahta may have been just as cruel as some men and women, except she was judged too harshly because her gender ensured that she was seen as violating more taboos than men.

Whereas in the book Agawegahta remains one of the highest-ranking soldiers, in the film, a woman, Ma'aza, becomes the highest-ranking leader in the unit after a male commander dies. This seems to suggest that men and women had equal opportunities in attaining leadership roles. Once again, the film overlooks the struggle of women within the highly patriarchal military camps. It is important to represent women as heroes, but, from a gender sensitive

¹²¹ Previously mentioned in Chapter Four.

lens, it is equally important not to lose sight of the structural constraints within which women have to act.

Mehari also specifically titles one of the sections in her book ‘Still a girl,’ in which she speaks of her experience of rape (2006: 123). In the film, however, there is no rape of children, despite the fact that rape is one of the horrible experiences that, according to Mehari, she and many other girls had to endure. Indeed, Mehari indicates that, as Jonathan Zilberg points out, rape has a ‘unique terror it holds for women’ and a ‘unique power it gives the rapist over his victim’ (2010: 113). There is only an indication that some women have children in the camp, but with no clarification on whether the children were a result of consensual sexual relationships or not. There is one scene in which a mother is breastfeeding her baby. In another scene, a baby is forcefully handed over to an old couple in a village for them to look after, but there is no indication of the potential effects this has on the mother from whose arms the baby is yanked; we never see the mother in the scene.¹²² Mazurana et al. note that ‘potential psychological effects of this mother-child separation can reasonably be expected to result’ (2002: 114).

Honwana points out that the sexual victimisation of girls in war is ‘still surrounded by silence and secrecy ... in many conflict and post-conflict situations throughout the world’ (2006: 79). Honwana found that few young women are comfortable talking about their war experiences (2006: 79). Mehari also says when she was in the military camp ‘it was taboo to talk about sex or rape. Girls fell pregnant all the time, but everyone behaved as if the pregnancies were not happening’ (2006: 124). For Mehari, it is important that women and girls speak about their experiences of sexual abuse so that people are aware that it happened or is happening.

¹²² According to Mehari, there was no support for women who had babies ‘so they either murdered their infants or put them in orphanages’ (2006: 127).

But the producers of *Heart of Fire* decided not to include the issue of rape in their film, thus silencing Mehari's voice on this issue that she saw as particularly gendered.

Kate Taylor-Jones argues that rape has a negative cultural stigma that is recognised and upheld globally, and therefore excluding child rape from the film allows Awet 'to remain above the war narrative to function as a symbol for potential peace and the innate innocence of children' (2016: 184). Thus, rather than exploring a personal gendered experience, the film overlooks the fact that war experiences are gendered and that boys and girls do not necessarily have the same experiences. The representation of Awet becomes an exploration of childhood in a war environment rather than that of girlhood, despite the added risk that, according to Mazurana et al. (2002: 112):

comes as a result of [girls'] lower status compared to boys, and the higher likelihood that their lives will be characterised by inequalities such as having less food to eat, receiving poorer health care, undertaking heavier workloads, and experiencing decreased choices and freedoms when compared with boys in their communities.

Mehari also indicates other experiences that were unique to girls. These include what Mazurana et al. describe as the 'acute embarrassment and even mental distress' resulting from 'private reproductive body processes becom[ing] public' (2002: 114). Mehari speaks of a traumatic experience in which people at the camp laughed at one of the girls at the camp because she went to the doctor when she discovered that she was bleeding through her vagina. Just like the girl, Senait also did not know what that meant and became worried that

the dreadful thing would also happen to her. Mehari's story is therefore that of a girl soldier rather than simply that of a child soldier.

Her Story and His Story

Filmmakers are members of a race, class, gender and sub-culture, among other things. The intersection of these factors 'supplies the individual with particular ways of making sense of the world' (Dyer 1979: 8). When writing about the adaptation of the novel *The Color Purple* written by Alice Walker (1982), a black woman, into a film by Steven Spielberg (1985), a white man, Jacqueline Bobo suggests that 'Spielberg's sensibilities [were] shaped by forces different from those which produced the novel' (1993: 279). The same can be said about the film, *Heart of Fire*, which is directed by a male Italian director, but inspired by a memoir written by an Eritrean-born former girl soldier. The two people's "sensibilities" are bound to be shaped by different forces, and this is reflected in their stories.

Falorni's *Heart of Fire* capitalises on the currency that African civil war narratives and their child soldier images have gained in recent years. The film presents the life of a child soldier within the context of a liberation war, but then focuses less on Eritrea's fight for independence against Ethiopia and more on the in-fighting between the Eritrean Liberation front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), referred to in the film as the Jebha and the Shabia, respectively. However, the film does not exactly conform to the "single story" that characterise many narratives about African child soldiers as outlined by Catarina Martins.¹²³ It does not contain the drug-crazed performances to which viewers have become accustomed. Also, unlike the 'demons, hyped up on drugs, who [kidnap] children' that

¹²³ Discussed in Chapter Two.

Harrow (2013: 8) speaks of, the army commanders and leaders in *Heart of Fire* are relatively “noble” fighters, and some of them explicitly object to the use of children in combat.¹²⁴ However, the film shows a distinct deterioration of the situation as the war shifts from a conventional one fought by adults for a well-defined cause to the chaos that characterises the representations of contemporary postcolonial wars in Africa’s so-called failed states.¹²⁵ Thus, the film represents a pessimistic view of Africa’s postcolonial history in the making. Awet has to learn to be her own hero because the adults have failed her or are simply not there. In many ways, unlike Mehari who prioritises her own experiences as a girl in a war environment, Falorni prioritises using the girl soldier to make judgements about the war and the society within which the war is waged.

Framing the War

In the opening titles, the film acknowledges the Eritrean War of Independence as justified by classifying Ethiopian rule as “foreign.” But, without any further explanation, the viewer is informed that the liberation movement split, leading to what is described as a ‘fanatical, fratricidal war.’ Since this is not part of Awet’s narration, we can assume that the titles are a way for the filmmakers to provide a brief history of the conflict as well as a context for Awet’s experiences. But, while this information might be useful, it over-simplifies the war in Eritrea, dividing it into two clearly defined segments: the justified war and the unjustified war. This is unlike Mehari’s approach which ensures that she does not seem to claim that she is representing general opinions about the war. In Mehari’s memoir, Senait is portrayed as a

¹²⁴ The film is still clear on the fact that children should not have been involved in any war activities in the first place.

¹²⁵ For example, the liberation fighters’ ‘enthusiastic welcome in the villages’ that Awet speaks of in her earlier experiences of the military camp later on descends into dreaded encounters as the soldiers turn to pillaging, taking every last bit of food that the villagers have.

political subject who constantly seeks to understand the world around her, and her quest is more personal than a representation of people's general views.

The Eritrean War of Independence

Heart of Fire is set within the context of one of the most complex wars to be fought in Africa. This is because the Eritreans were not fighting against white colonial rule; they were fighting against an African regime. Although the Eritreans strongly believed that their war was just,¹²⁶ they faced difficulties in gaining international support because the war was generally defined as 'separatist, narrowly ethnic and religious' (Bereketeab, 2016: 4). For the majority of the international community, "liberation war" extended only to the struggle against white rule,' and they could not therefore 'accord the same status to insurgencies directed against indigenous African regimes' (Bereketeab, 2016: 14). For example, the Organisation of African Union (OAU)'s member states campaigned against the Eritreans' claims because of what they saw as the potentially damaging effects that separating Eritrea from Ethiopia would have on 'the proclaimed sanctity of African Borders' (Bereketeab, 2016: 11). African countries are largely made up of many ethnic and identity groups within their borders, and it was imperative for the ruling elite to maintain the inherited colonial borders (Iyob, 1995; Bereketeab, 2016). Despite the fact that 'the resolution on the sanctity of colonial borders' did not apply to the Eritrean case, Ethiopia successfully lobbied for this resolution, which was passed in 1964 at the OAU Summit in Cairo (Iyob, 1995: 56). The Eritrean War of Independence was then treated as an internal war rather than a legitimate claim for self-governance.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ One of their slogans was *q'nu'e qalsi yi'ewet* ('Just war succeeds') (Bereketeab, 2016: 18).

¹²⁷ The fact that the headquarters of the OAU was in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, made it difficult for the Eritrean liberation movements to gain access to the organisation (Iyob, 1995: 54).

We get a hint of the status of the Eritrean War of Independence among non-Eritreans through a statement made by a white boy, Pino, who lives with Awet at the orphanage. When a group of children from the orphanage, including Pino and Awet, are walking down the street under the supervision of two Catholic Sisters, they see a group of Eritrean fighters who have been arrested. An offscreen voice says, 'Look, the Ethiopians have captured some rebels,' and then Pino, while smiling, responds saying 'And now they'll kill them.' To him the death of "Eritrean rebels" is clearly good news, echoing the general sentiment of Ethiopia's political legitimacy among many non-Eritrean people. But, the film does not present this as a significant issue that Eritreans had to deal with on a broader international level. The boy is quickly reprimanded by one of the Sisters and told to not say such things. The boy then adds that one of the rebels might be Awet's father, a statement clearly aimed at annoying Awet, thus turning the boy into a bully rather than a politically conscious being. As a result, the boy is not exactly supposed to be taken seriously.

Although Mehari's book, just like the film, does not go into greater detail in explaining Eritrea's situation within global politics during the war, it provides more context on the history and conditions of the Eritrean people through references to Italian colonial rule and demonstrating the brutality of Ethiopian rule. Rather than treat the legitimacy of the Eritreans' claim as an assumption that should be taken for granted as the film does through its opening titles, the book provides enough information and experiences to demonstrate the case. For example, the first orphanage Mehari remembers to have lived at was a run-down shack under the administration of the Ethiopian government. She explains that at this orphanage, she was told that Mengistu Haile Mariam, the Communist leader of Ethiopia, was their god and that 'he made the lions to punish bad people' (Mehari, 2006: 3). This can be

seen as reflecting a child's lived experience of the coercive Ethiopian regime as well as its neglect of the Eritrean people. Mehari mentions that when she went to live with her grandparents, the family was constantly harassed by Ethiopian soldiers (2006: 29). After she moved to live with her father, the Ethiopian army once dropped dolls filled with explosives in their village (2006: 45). She claims that the dolls 'had been especially constructed and scattered to maim and kill children' (ibid.). Thus, Mehari takes time to demonstrate that she sees Eritrea's War of Independence as justified because, as Odhiambo states, 'Ethiopia had become repressive against the Eritreans' (Odhiambo, 2009: 57).

Other cases of similar extreme brutality by the Ethiopian regime which corroborate Mehari's experiences of Ethiopia's colonial rule have been recorded elsewhere. For example, Bereketeab writes of a case in the village of Besigdera in which villagers were ordered to assemble in a church and then massacred with machine guns (2016: 26). Mary Dines states that Ethiopia excluded Eritreans when distributing the food aid it received during famine (1980: 61). Edmond J. Keller mentions that allegations have been made that Ethiopia's Derg regime attempted to systematically 'stave the people of Tigre and Eritrea' (1992: 623).¹²⁸

In addition to experiences of the Ethiopian government's repression, Mehari speaks of the institutional racism she endured at the Catholic orphanage. She writes that, while at the orphanage, she concluded that Daniel Comboni, the Italian Roman Catholic Bishop after whom the orphanage was named, 'wanted to help the white children more than the black children' (2006: 13). This statement exposes the hypocrisy of the colonial civilising mission. She explains that black children were not allowed to use the playground, which she describes

¹²⁸ The Derg regime refers to the Military Committee that came into power in Ethiopia in 1974 after ousting Emperor Haile Selassie. The Tigre people were among the many Ethiopian groups who rose up against the dictatorship of the Derg.

as a ‘paradise’ (ibid.).¹²⁹ Black children also ate at a small table in a tiny room while the white children ate in a ‘large dining room, with a ceiling so high that you could barely see it’ (2006: 13). Thus, Mehari also links her experience to the legacy of Italian colonialism. Indeed, the Eritrean experience cannot be fully understood without reference to its history as Italy’s colony. Ruth Iyob explains that Eritrea was ‘constructed from the encounters with Italian colonialism, Ethiopian hegemony, and the post-1945 international system’ (1995: 3). Eritrea came into being as a colony of Italy in the late 1800s, and was later ceded to the British in 1942 after the defeat of the Italians in Eritrea during World War II (Bernal, 2001). The British administered Eritrea as a “trusteeship” until 1952, at which point it was federated to Ethiopia following a United Nations decision to do so (Bereketeab, 2016; Bernal, 2001; Iyob, 1995). On November 14, 1962, Eritrea was annexed to Ethiopia and became its fourteenth province.

All the colonial experiences, both Italian and Ethiopian, that Mehari takes her time to explore, are neglected in the film. Sophie Mayer suggest that ‘the opening and closing intertitles pay lip service to the validity of Eritrea’s struggle for independence against Ethiopia, and the film uses this – and even more so the in-fighting between the Jebha and Shabia factions within the liberation army – to obscure Italy’s destructive role as a colonial power’ (Mayer, 2009: 64). It is therefore revealing that given the complex history of Eritrea as well as the “true life” experiences that Mehari’s book provides, the filmmakers chose to create a narrative that focuses exclusively on the conflict between the ELF and the EPLF. The film also takes on a neo-colonial stereotypical representation of African postcolonial wars in

¹²⁹ In the film, the scene which introduces Awet at the orphanage shows her playing in the rain with another black girl. Two more girls, who are also black, play in the background. But there is no reference to implied racism.

which the reason for fighting is either unclear or simplified to greed, so that the experience of the child soldier becomes a lot more tragic.

The ELF versus the EPLF

All we knew was that we were the ELF, who were the right side, and they were the EPLF, who were the wrong side.

Mehari, 2006: 60

In the film, when Awet and her sister, Freweyni, are on their way to their father's home, Awet smiles when Freweyni informs her that they are entering the liberated zone. But, ironically, Awet's experience of war happens when she moves to the liberated zone of Eritrea. Although the conflict between the ELF and EPLF in the liberated zones is based on actual historical experience,¹³⁰ as Mehari indicates, the fighting in these zones was not just restricted to the ELF and EPLF, the Ethiopian forces used to attack too, even the civilian population (Mehari, 2006). Thus, liberation in these zones was not necessarily a permanent feature. For example, in 1977-1978 Soviet military helped the Ethiopian government to regain control over some areas that had been liberated by the ELF and the EPLF (Iyob, 1995: 58).

The film's representation of liberated zones as areas of "fanatical" infighting seems to take its cue from the neo-colonial archive which holds the sanctity of colonial borders and

¹³⁰ Infighting was also very common within liberation movements in many other African countries. For example, during Zimbabwe's liberation struggle there were conflicts between the two main liberation armies, the Zimbabwe National Liberation Army (ZANLA) and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA). ZANLA was the armed wing of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and ZIPRA was the armed wing of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU).

decontextualises African postcolonial wars. Such a representation has negative implications for understanding the postcolonial experiences of African countries. It seems for a war to be defined as justified, there should be a common goal across all groups within artificially determined borders. In cases where the groups have different views, as was the case in Eritrea, which is made up of a diversity of people, the war then becomes aimless.¹³¹

When Awet and Freweyni arrive in their father's village, they find their father in a bar singing liberation songs with his friends. The song is about a freedom fighter who is a 'champion of tolerance.'¹³² However, this idealistic view of the liberation struggle is shattered when two men who support the EPLF walk in. For the first time, Awet becomes aware that there is more than one organisation within the liberation movement, and that people from the different organisations do not always get along. In the exchange between one of the two men and Awet's father, the film emphasises ego as the reason behind the war. It seems the main motive for the conflict is to claim full credit for bringing independence to Eritrea. One of the two men says, 'listen to them, still singing those old songs. The Jebha is finished! ... The Shabia is waging war now.'¹³³ This scene is particularly interesting because it is the filmmaker's own idea and does not come from Mehari's book, and also because the filmmakers try to ensure that viewers are constantly aware of the fact that Awet is witnessing this occurrence. This event is indeed a shock to Awet who has been living within the

¹³¹ Eritrea is 'half-Christian and half-Moslem and home to nine ethno-linguistic groups' (Bereketeab, 2016: 146).

¹³² The freedom fighter is defined as male and there is emphasis on the fact that 'he brings freedom to the country.'

¹³³ The ELF's defeat by the EPLF meant forfeiting 'the right to call itself a legitimate liberation organization' (Bairu, 2016: 189).

protection of the orphanage, and may have planted the roots of Awet's disillusionment with the war.

The fact that the confrontation happens between two men in a bar and not in battle, and that no one else joins in, even those who had been singing along with Awet's father, makes the issue more personal than political. Bereketab argues for the possibility that the war between the ELF and the EPLF may have been influenced by 'personal dislikes, suspicions and distrust among political leaders' (2016: 232). But he says this in reference to the executive leadership responsible for the ultimate decision to continue the war. In her book, Mehari states that in later years, after she and her sisters had joined her father in Germany, he would take them to EPLF rallies just so he could antagonise EPLF members, but EPLF activists 'respected him too much to really beat him up properly' (2006: 189). This indicates that the EPLF members did not take his rants too personally. But this was of course unless he called them things like 'shitfaces,' at which point he would receive punches (Mehari, 2006: 189). Mehari also indicates that her father was not a person to be taken seriously. He was always drunk at the rallies and, when drunk, 'he bubbled complete nonsense' (2006: 189).

During her time with the ELF, Senait, as Mehari calls herself in her book, consistently asks why they are fighting with the EPLF, but does not get any answer. This is probably because the rank and file she fought with also did not know the real answer. All they knew was that the EPLF 'were the wrong side.' However, the film tries to provide that answer for the audience, but without capturing the complexities of the situation.

After a scuffle between the man and Awet's father, Awet's father says to the man, 'We were fighting for Eritrea before you or your father were born!,' thus suggesting that the conflict

may have been just about egos. In her book, Mehari states that after the demise of the ELF, her father could just ‘not accept that the ELF had lost the war’ (2006: 191), but she does not suggest that egos were to blame for the war. Bereketeab argues that the ELF’s loss of control to the EPLF was ‘bitter medicine to swallow’ since they had begun the struggle (2016: xvi). But, in explaining the reasons for the war, he proposes a ‘synthetic model’ that combines factors such as ideology, foreign policy orientation, ‘geo-religious and geo-linguistic, personal difference and elite competition’ (2016: 236). The film’s focus on egos makes the conflict truly aimless.

However, Awet’s father’s reference to generations of resistance may point to ethnic or religious affiliations because, by this time, the ELF had only been in existence for about two decades. Bereketeab explains that just before Ethiopia annexed Eritrea, the consensus among the two main religious groups in Eritrea, Moslems and Christians, was disrupted, resulting in a split (2016: 28). A Christian dominated Unionist Party which supported uniting Eritrea with Ethiopia emerged (*ibid.*). On the other hand, some Moslems saw the idea of annexation as placing Moslem communities under the domination of Christians because they considered Ethiopia a Christian country (*ibid.*). ELF’s armed wing was formed in 1961 by a group of Moslem men (Bereketeab, 2016: 29). But this line of argument is not followed through in the film, so that Awet’s Father’s statement becomes the rant of a drunk and egotistical man. He also declares that he will fight to his death for his village, but ends up sending his daughters to fight instead.

Mehari does not shy away from mentioning religion as she indicates that there were people from many different religions in her unit. Some prayed to Allah, some to ‘gods who could be anywhere – in a rock, a tree, or underground,’ and there were Christians like herself, her

sisters and Mike'ele (Mehari, 2006: 90-92).¹³⁴ There was also Agawegahta, who believed that 'we are our own gods,' and 'hated the sight of people rolling around in the dirt praying to Jesus, Allah or other gods' (Mehari, 2006: 92). But then her view only reflects the situation at the rank and file level, which Bereketeab says by the mid-1970s was filled up by people from different socio-economic, linguistic and religious backgrounds, including Christian Tigrinya speakers (2016: 30). Bereketeab maintains that leadership was still dominated by Moslems (2016: 40). It cannot be said with certainty that the film circumvents explicitly mentioning any religious conflicts in order that viewers can focus on the plight of child soldiers and not be distracted by, or feel alienated through the representation of religious conflict. However, there is a possibility that the film avoided the issue of religion for both economic and political reasons. The film was made during the period after the 11th of September 2001 attack on the Twin Towers in the United States of America, for which a Moslem fundamentalist group claimed responsibility. Thus, religion was a very sensitive and divisive issue at the time. Incorporating issues of religion would have been a huge risk especially if the filmmakers wanted to attract a wider international audience.

There are many other reasons which have been suggested for the split between the ELF and EPLF, and the ensuing conflict. When exploring the events that led to the formation of EPLF by a splinter group from the ELF, Francois Houtart explains that in the mid to late 1960s, there were bitter debates within the ELF revolving 'around the character, the objectives and motive forces of the revolution' (1980: 94). For example, while the conservatives wanted to focus on liberation, those demanding reform believed that in order to fulfil popular aspiration for independence, social transformation had to be embedded within the liberation struggle

¹³⁴ Mike'ele was one of the soldiers in the camp. Senait Mehari does not specify his age, but because he was often with the younger soldiers, it is possible that he was still a child, although older than Senait.

(ibid.). Social transformation involved replacing the exploitative structures of society with ‘basic interests for the majority of the people’ (ibid.). According to Houtart (1980), the EPLF set out to do what they said they would. For example, when they liberated zones they would undertake land redistribution in which village members obtained land, not as part of the family, but as individuals, thus enabling women to own land in their own right (Houtart, 1980: 104). However, there are differing opinions on which of the two organisations, the ELF and the EPLF, was the most Marxist, with some scholars arguing for the ELF (Bereketeab, 2016: 221). Also, just like the ELF, the EPLF was not above reproach.

In cases of civil wars, it is often difficult or even impossible to tell which side is right and which one is wrong, but it is too simplified to blame the whole situation on greed, because all parties often have their own sets of grievances. The relationship between the ELF and the EPLF was characterised by mutual suspicion and betrayal. For example, during the unity agreement of 1977, the EPLF suspected that the ELF was having secret negotiations with the Ethiopian government, and, at the same time, the ELF had the same suspicions about EPLF (Bereketeab, 2016: 228). However, the EPLF was indeed having secret meetings with the Ethiopians at the time (ibid.). Just like any military organisation, the EPLF also committed acts of violence, but because it emerged the stronger of the two, it was in a position to control the narrative, and therefore its actions are often evaluated within the context of the demands of the liberation war (see Bondestam, 1980; Chaliand, 1980; Connell, 1980).¹³⁵ As Bereketeab says about the liberation war: ‘People knew that human rights were violated and that abuses and crimes committed, but these were condoned as a necessary cost for the sake of common goals’ (2016: xv).

¹³⁵ The EPLF is the organisation that finally propelled Eritrea to victory.

In the film, it is revealed that the ELF regards the EPLF as an organisation of traitors, although it is never clear why. In the bar fight, Awet's father calls them traitors, and later on in the film, Ma'aza also refers to them as traitors. Herui Tedla Bairu claims that after the ELF and EPLF signed a unity agreement in 1977, the EPLF used the "unity" formula to penetrate ELF constituencies and, 'when the so-called Civil War was revived by the PLF in 1979-80, the ELF was already disabled' from inside (2016: 184). If this is true, then the ELF had a valid reason to believe they had been betrayed.

We could assume that the film adopts a child's perspective of the war, but then the film does not always use Awet's perspective. There are scenes in which we seem to get the camera's objective view or other people's perspectives and not Awet's. For example, in the scene where one of the female soldiers responsible for training Awet and the other younger soldiers insists that Awet be executed for tempering with his fellow soldiers' guns, we get the camera's objective view of her, Ma'aza and Mike'ele.¹³⁶ During the conversation, Ma'aza turns around to look at Awet, and we get her point-of-view of Awet, who is kneeling on the ground while holding the gun on her shoulders with both hands. Ma'aza decides they should leave her like that for a while as a form of punishment. We also get the camera's objective view of Freweyni standing in a lorry, looking at her sister as the lorry drives away. After everyone leaves, we get a combination of Awet's perspective as she looks around her environment, and the camera's view of the child, which serves to emphasise her aloneness, feeling of isolation and the dominance of the environment on the small frame of the child. This scene of her alone in the camp is intercut with scenes of her unit raiding a village. The film, therefore, does not simply follow Awet's perspective, which means the lack of context

¹³⁶ Unlike in the memoir, in the film Mike'ele is one of the leaders, and is responsible for the young children's political education.

might be because the filmmakers, as they indicate at the beginning of the film, were of the view that the conflict between the ELF and EPLF was pointless and ‘fanatical.’

Heart of Fire also introduces two other scenes that are not in Mehari’s book in order to demonstrate the contradictions that characterised the liberation movement. In one scene, during a political education session at the ELF military camp, Ma’aza informs the new recruits, including Awet, that once they have liberated Eritrea, they will build ‘a free, aspiring and socialist country,’ in which people share everything they have. However, soon afterwards, at dinner time, Awet discovers that the older fighters who have guns eat first, and the younger children have to scrap for left-overs. Criticism for such a hypocritical system only comes from a child, Awet, who is powerless to do anything about the situation, making it a problem that is impossible to solve. Herui Tedla Bairu, who co-founded another political movement during the war, the Eritrean Democratic Movement (EDM), claims that there was need for another organization partly because the Marxist identity of the ELF was dubious (2016: 180). Bairu’s opinion is clearly subjective, however, it indicates that fellow Eritreans were critical of the liberation movements and therefore the hypocrisy did not go unchecked.

The film sets up Awet, the girl, as an eyewitness to adult interactions that only serve to show the aimlessness of the war. The combination of Awet’s perspective and an objective view makes the observations about the war more general rather than personal. On the other hand, Senait, in Mehari’s book, seeks to find out why they are fighting the EPLF but fails to find a satisfactory answer. Although her failure to find an answer may be an answer in itself, it becomes more a personal observation rather than a general one. Additionally, the film also represents Eritrean adults as largely incapable of looking after children.

Next is a look at how Falorni and Mehari portray the relationship between children and adults. This is necessary because it helps to determine how the society within which the girl soldier exists is imagined.

The Relationship Between Children and Adults

The very first scene in Falorni's *Heart of Fire* is the discovery of a baby girl who has been abandoned by her mother. Although this scene comes from Mehari's book, in the film it is framed differently. In Mehari's book, we are informed that her mother was arrested and sentenced to six years in prison for attempted infanticide (2006: 2). The book does not indicate how common the issue of child abandonment was, but the arrest indicates that it was socially unacceptable and warranted state intervention to make sure that children were protected from such a fate. On the other hand, in the film Awet explains that her mother left her because she wanted to escape the civil war, but was not successful. It can be assumed here that the statement means the mother is dead. Thus, the issue of child abandonment is not resolved in a way that involves social intervention. This form of representation increases the vulnerability of children within this community because of the lack of social and legal control on adults.

In Falorni's film, after Awet is abandoned by her mother, she is placed in the care of an orphanage run by the Catholic Church, which ends up having the most positive influence in her life. It is the place where she is given the "heart of fire," which becomes a symbol of strength, resilience and survival. The "heart of fire" becomes the currency she uses to pay for the passage to Sudan at the end of the film. It is also at the Catholic orphanage that she is taught to stand up for herself and not let anyone treat her like a slave, a lesson that comes in handy towards the end of the film when she resolves to leave the military group. She

challenges Ma'aza to treat her like an equal by offering her second cheek after Ma'aza slaps her with the outside of her hand, like a slave. Sister Anna at the orphanage had taught her that during Jesus' time, slaves were slapped with the outside of a hand. Jesus then told them to offer the other cheek as a way of declaring their equality because, in order to slap the other cheek, the offending party would have had to use the inside of their hand. The Catholic orphanage is represented within the colonial discourse of the civilizing mission. This is despite the fact that, as mentioned earlier, Mehari's experience at the Catholic orphanage was characterized by institutional racism. What Mehari describes as a form of institutional racism is transformed into bullying perpetrated by one of the children at the home. In a symbolic representation of the deterioration of Awet's condition after leaving the orphanage, for the rest of the film she wears the same dress she is wearing when she leaves the home, and the dress gets more torn and dirty as the film progresses.¹³⁷

In Mehari's book, before the girl is taken to the Catholic orphanage, she is taken in and looked after by the state. The difference between the two is that when the government intervenes, it is simply doing what it is supposed to do, that is, to protect its people.¹³⁸ On the other hand, when the church intervenes, the intervention takes on a humanitarian slant. Humanitarian intervention is often employed when communities have failed or are incapable. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Singer and Dovey have argued that in portrayals of African civil wars, adults are often represented as 'alternately brutal, devoid of agency, or quite

¹³⁷ Mehari states that they wore 'clothes sent by the Red Cross in Europe' (2006: 55), which indicates that she would not have worn the dress from the orphanage for the entire period she was with the ELF.

¹³⁸ However, as mentioned earlier, Mehari describes the state-run orphanage in rather unflattering terms. The buildings were run down and they did not have enough food. Such neglect was part of Eritrea's colonial experience.

simply absent' (2012: 153). These forms of portrayal form a significant theme in the representation of Awet in Falorni's *Heart of Fire*.

When Awet's father sends her sister, Freweyni, to collect her from the orphanage, she is happy because she can finally live with her own family. But she soon realises that Freweyni and herself are not exactly considered equal members of the family. The two girls become the family's slaves, doing much of the difficult work such as fetching water while their step-mother's children play and enjoy their childhood. This experience is similar to that described in Mehari's book. Mehari's experience might even have been more sinister because she is convinced that if it was not for her step-mother who suggested she and her two sisters be taken to join the ELF, her father would have killed her with a machete.¹³⁹ And yet, the book explains the desperation that led the father to sending her daughters to the war: he was poor and could not afford to look after them. The war had reduced the family into nomads who were constantly on the move and had to scavenge for food. In the film, according to Freweyni, the father simply volunteers her daughters because his friends were doing the same. If Freweyni is to be believed, the father is all about keeping up appearances. For example, in the bar fight mentioned earlier, the father shows the EPLF supporter a scar from a wound that he claims he obtained in the war. However, Freweyni later informs Awet that the wound was not from the war; he got injured in a bar fight.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ In the book Mehari has two sisters, Yaldiyan and Tzegehana, instead of the one sister that Awet has in the film.

¹⁴⁰ This is also another instant of adult hypocrisy.

Perhaps what is more interesting is that in Mehari's book, before the girl is sent to live with her father she goes to live with her grandparents.¹⁴¹ But this episode, which Mehari describes as the happiest time of her life, a time she 'felt nurtured and secure and loved as [she] never would feel again' (2006: 21), is completely eliminated from the film.

When introducing her book, Mehari (2006) writes that:

Now that I have written everything down, I am free.

This book will give me peace.

The story I have to tell is a terrible one.

But I do not want those who read it
to see only the darkness.

I want a door to open as they read it.

So light comes through – and hope.

Thus, Mehari sees the process of writing her story and sharing it as a way of managing her traumatic past experience 'as well as achieving internal psychological reconciliation' (Odhiambo, 2009: 59). But, significantly, her purpose is not to adopt a humanitarian discourse, which, according to Laura Edmondson, demands that the traumatic past be represented 'as a time of unrelenting terror and suffering' (2005: 469). As the title of her book, *Heart of Fire: From Child Soldier to Soul Singer*, indicates, Mehari writes an inspiring story that may potentially empower other former girl soldiers who have been through similar experiences. Her story is about the past as much as it is about the present and the future, and it encourages former child soldiers to not give up on working at shaping their future.

¹⁴¹ Mehari's aunt, Mbrat, pretends to be her mother and collects her from the orphanage.

Regardless, Falorni tailors Awet's experience in line with the humanitarian discourse by focusing only on the unhappy and/or distressful moments. That is, rather than inspire former child soldiers, it seems to target those outside of that experience in order to show them the plight of child soldiers.

However, Falorni complicates the image of the helpless child by characterising Awet with 'agency and inner strength,' an approach which Edmondson argues 'run[s] a considerable risk of diminishing the emotional response that theoretically generates charitable contributions' to the cause (2005: 469). But it is possible that Falorni's strategy may not reduce viewers' emotional response because Awet's agency only serves to emphasise the incompetence or absence of adults. For example, one of the adult soldiers, Mike'ele, tells Awet that he wants her to join him when he escapes from the camp, but he dies before they escape, leaving Awet to be the hero who ensures that she, her sister and her friend leave. In the book, Senait and her sisters are saved from the military by their father's brother, Haile.

It should be noted that in the military camp children have a rather complex relationship with adults. We never see the group press-ganging or abducting children, which means those children we see in the camp either joined voluntarily or were brought in by their parents or guardians as is the case with Awet and Freweyni. But the group never says no to the recruitment of children either. The children receive political education,¹⁴² which is unlike the brainwashing received by children in films such as *Blood Diamond* (Zwick, 2006) and *Ezra* (Aduaka, 2007), in which the children are introduced to drugs and told that the 'gun is now your mother and father.' Mehari states that in the beginning both the EPLF and the ELF had

¹⁴² Mehari, however, received such education in the liberated villages before she went to war. She says that in the military camp 'no one seemed to care for such talk;' the main concern on people's minds was survival (Mehari, 2006: 59).

‘organisations dedicated to training young people ..., which took in children between six and ten years of age, not as child soldiers yet but in preparation for fighting’ (2006: 64).¹⁴³ These children were taught reading and writing, as well as maths, ‘Eritrean history, Marxism and party propaganda’ (ibid.). We see this in the film in which Mike’ele, who is fully dedicated to the children, spends time teaching them Eritrean history, and insists that the children should not be given guns.

But again, in war situations the difference between political education and brain washing can be unclear. As mentioned in Chapter Four, sometimes coercion is mistaken for politicisation. In her memoir, Mehari writes that she eventually learnt not to ask questions because she often got a violent beating whenever she asked questions, even worse if the question seemed to challenge the ideas of the ELF. For example, Mihret, who is responsible for training the young recruits, beats her when she asks why they were killing EPLF soldiers even though they did not look any different from them, and came from the same tribe as them (2006: 105-106). When speaking about the children handling guns, Mehari says that ‘they were merely doing as they were told, for there was no question of resistance or doubt’ (2006: 66). In the film, the children are taught to fully accept ‘the ideas, opinions, and beliefs’ of the ELF, ‘and to not consider other ideas, opinions, and beliefs’ as per the *Merriam-Webster’s Learner’s Dictionary*’s (2015) definition of the word indoctrinate referred to in Chapter One. It is only that the methods used in the film are not as violent as those described in the book.

But, similar to Senait in Mehari’s book, Awet does not seem to fully reach Checkel’s (in Lotte Vermeij, 2011: 182) Type II internalisation discussed in Chapter Two. That is, she does not fully adopt the interests and identity of the ELF so that its values become the principles

¹⁴³ This system fell apart as the war continued, at least in the ELF camp (Mehari, 2006: 64).

that govern her moral compass. Towards the end of the film, when she is confronted with the decision of whether to shoot an EPLF soldier or not, she chooses not to. She notices that the soldier is wearing the same type of shoes as her, confirming that the EPLF soldiers live just as miserably as they do,¹⁴⁴ implying that, as Bereketeab (2016: 237) argues, the war ultimately served the Eritrean elites.¹⁴⁵

In the end, Awet confronts her former role model, Ma'aza, informing her that she is done with the war. She hands over her gun and walks away, despite knowing that deserters were normally killed.¹⁴⁶ This act represents a reversal of roles in the film. Throughout the film, Awet is the one who is constantly being abandoned by adults. Her decision to leave the camp indicates that she has finally come to terms with the fact that she cannot rely on adults or expect them to do the right thing. That is, she decides to write them off. This is perhaps one of the situations in which Nhongo-Simbanegavi's (2000: 123) statement that the need for heroines should not 'obliterate visions of the truth, no matter how distressing,' holds some significance. Awet is turned into the ultimate hero, thus obliterating some of the realities of girl soldiers, especially those her age.

Suggested Solutions

Once it has been established that African adults are not taking their responsibility to look after children, and the issue of racism is eliminated, the solution suggested at the end of the

¹⁴⁴ Mehari mentions that shoes were often in short supply although they needed them 'most urgently of all – for the ground was hard, rocky, and littered with painful thorns' (2006: 55).

¹⁴⁵ Maneshka Eliatamby states that the ELF leadership even went as far as killing its own fighters who had demanded change within the organisation (2011: 40).

¹⁴⁶ Awet had however not witnessed the execution of deserters as Senait does in Mehari's book.

film becomes more acceptable. It is not enough for Awet to leave Eritrea, she has to leave Africa altogether. Mayer argues that the film ‘offers the neo-imperialist dream of globalisation in place of both the reality of Italy's current mistreatment of African migrants and the possibility of a functioning, independent African democracy’ (2009: 64). It should be noted that Mehari does indeed leave Eritrea, then Sudan, and ends up in Germany where she lives with her father for a while. But she notes that at the time if she had a choice on the matter, she would have stayed with her uncle, Haile, in Sudan, rather than go and live with her abusive father in Germany (2006: 168-173).¹⁴⁷ Additionally, Mehari does not present an escape to Europe as the ideal solution. She describes the neighbourhood she lived in after moving to Germany as a “foreigners’ ghetto” which, for the most part, ‘looked not unlike Africa’ (2006: 179). Thus, although she no longer had to deal with war or extreme poverty, she had to deal with the racism and discrimination that Africans faced in that country.

In the film, the idea of escaping to Europe is planted earlier on so that going to Europe becomes Awet’s dream even before she leaves the ELF. When Mike’ele tells her that once they leave the ELF he is going to proceed to Italy, Awet asks him to take her as well. Mayer suggests that ‘with an Italian director and German producers, the film wears its apparently liberal humanist politics ... in Mike'ele's fantasy of a better life in Italy’ (2009: 64). In the memoir, the Italians are not presented in a flattering manner. First there is the racism at the Catholic orphanage which is run by Italians. Then there is the fact that Mike’ele’s father, who

¹⁴⁷ It is however doubtful whether as an adult she would make the same choice. In her book, Mehari has some problematic stereotypes about Africa, which suggests that as an adult she does not particularly think Africa is the best place to be. For example, she makes statements like, ‘In Africa, knowledge is a rare luxury, to be taken maximum advantage of’ (2006: 24). Tom Odhiambo suggests that these views may be ‘consequences of her traumatic years in Eritrea and her anger and emotional scars that she has had to live with for most of her life’ (2009: 57).

is Italian, abandoned him. Mehari (2006: 91-92) indicates that she thought Mike'ele's father was not any different from an African father like hers:

Mike'ele said his father must be dead, for otherwise he would have been there with Mike'ele. I did not dare to contradict him but merely thought to myself that it was possible for fathers to be alive but not be there, as was the case with mine.

The “escape to Europe” solution also overlooks the role of international or external parties in the war. Ruth Iyob states that the acquisition of Eritrea became ‘a source of diplomatic leverage in the Cold War, which translated into millions of dollars in economic and military aid’ (1995: 3). The Cold War created very tangled international relations, with countries like Eritrea being caught in the middle. For example, according to Mehari, the ELF got its arms supplies from Cuba (2006: 64). But Cuba was under the influence of the Soviet Union, which supported the Ethiopians. Chaliand argues that the Soviet Union supported Ethiopia in order to prevent Arab states, which it believed supported the ELF, from having full control of the Red Sea (1980: 53). The Soviet Union needed access to the Red Sea, which provided a ‘valuable short cut between Europe and Asia,’ and the USA had already gained influence ‘in two of the most important Red Sea states, Sudan and Egypt’ (Bondestam, 1980: 67). But, in a statement that contradicts Chaliand’s assertion, Bereketeab states that the Arab states ‘were under the direct influence of the Soviet Union, and served as conduits for the dissemination of Soviet ideology and influence to third parties’ (2016: 224).¹⁴⁸ Israel also assisted Ethiopia

¹⁴⁸ Perhaps this contradiction has to do with different historical references because during the Cold War alliances shifted and changed depending with the players’ interests. But the involvement of Cuba and Arab states which were under the Soviet Union’s influence suggests that the Soviet Union may have been playing both sides.

(Bondestam, 1980: 71). It is perhaps no coincidence that Eritrea achieved its independence just as the Cold War came to an end (Iyob, 1995: 125).

At the end of the film, we are informed that Eritrea attained independence from Ethiopia, but the issue of the conflict between the ELF and the EPLF is left hanging. We are simply told that the rest of Ma'aza's unit was killed. We are also informed that many Eritreans are still not able to return home, thus indicating that independence from Ethiopia did not necessarily mean peace.

As is the case with the beginning of the film, the film ends by providing "factual" information through on-screen text that shifts the perspective away from the girl soldier. The effect is that the film is framed within the views of the filmmakers.

Conclusion

Luigi Falorni's *Heart of Fire* provides an opportunity to consider the implications of the fact that girl soldiers are often not in a position to represent themselves on film and have to rely on others to represent them. Falorni takes on a story written by a former girl soldier, Senait Mehari, and uses it to construct the narrative of his film. The difference between the approach taken by Falorni and that taken by Mehari is very striking. This difference can be attributed partly to the forces that shape the "sensibilities" of the two storytellers. Where the female writer emphasises her gendered experiences, the male director focuses on the general experiences of a child soldier. Where the Eritrean born writer takes time to explore Eritrea's complex history through her lived experiences, the Italian director takes on a neo-colonial approach that decontextualises African postcolonial wars. Where the former girl soldier seeks to inspire, the third-party storyteller takes on a humanitarian angle that focuses on

highlighting the plight of the child soldier. Although this binary approach used to summarise the differences between Falorni's and Mehari's stories simplifies the relationship between the identity of the storytellers¹⁴⁹ and the stories they tell, it demonstrates the need for girl soldiers to be able to tell their stories. It also demonstrates the need for filmmakers to have an awareness of their subject positions so that they can be more sensitive to the voices of the people they represent.

The next chapter looks at the representation of a girl soldier in the film *War Witch* (Nguyen, 2012). The film is not set in a specific African country and therefore can be seen as attempting to represent the general experience of an African girl soldier within the context of postcolonial Africa.

¹⁴⁹ Identity as determined by the intersection of gender, class, race, cultural background, among many other factors.

Chapter Six

The Familiar and the Unfamiliar: Challenging Stereotypes in *War Witch*

Introduction

I saw films which were “objective.” But their story was written in the third person, they did not give the perspective of the child soldier. I wanted to make a film which talked from the point of view of the ‘I’, even if formally that will be stylized at certain times.

Kim Nguyen in an interview with Anne-Christine Loranger, 2012

Kim Nguyen’s *War Witch* (2012) presents a decidedly subjective view on the experiences of girl soldiers by portraying such experiences through the perspective of a girl soldier, an approach that automatically bestows her with some agency. The film explores the controversial issue of the moral responsibility of child soldiers, as well as the psychological effects of war on girl soldiers.¹⁵⁰ It is not necessarily about “what” Komona, the main character of the film, sees and experiences, but about “how” she sees and experiences her life. As such, the film takes on a very personal approach so that the “I” that Nguyen refers to in the statement above is very different from the “I” in *Heart of Fire*, the film discussed in the preceding chapter. Where *War Witch* takes the viewer into the mind of a girl soldier so that her experiences can be read on a psychological level, *Heart of Fire* emphasises the girl

¹⁵⁰ Michael G. Wessells draws attention to forms of damage on child soldiers other than physical, saying that ‘extensive harm arises also from the interaction of physical, psychological, social, and spiritual factors’ (2010: 183).

soldier's physical experiences. However, *War Witch* is not necessarily truer to the voice of girl soldiers than *Heart of Fire*. This is because *War Witch*'s representation is structured within certain generalised views about African postcolonial wars. For instance, the film is not set in a specific country. Instead, it is one of the generic "somewhere in Africa" type of films that tend to homogenise African experiences. Where *Heart of Fire*'s Awet is an Eritrean girl, Komona is simply an African girl. Secondly, the war is not contextualised. We just know that there are government forces and rebels, with the villagers caught in-between. The film also inherits the resource curse theory from films such as *Blood Diamond* (Zwick, 2006) with its mention of Coltan.¹⁵¹ However, these "cited images" serve to provide an access point that allows the film to move the viewer back and forth between the familiar and the unfamiliar.¹⁵² That way, the film is able to ensure that the presented world and the represented identities are not completely strange and incomprehensible. This chapter, therefore, argues that although *War Witch* compromises the voice of the girl soldier and incorporates some elements of the humanitarian approach, the film is still able to challenge the stereotypical representations of the girl soldier as a helpless victim without completely alienating the "uninformed" viewer.¹⁵³

The Africa "They" Know

War Witch begins by showing us an African community in images that emphasise the poverty and a sense of stasis that indicate lack of productivity: a field that seems to have more grass and weeds than it has food, a shack made of cardboard with a person looking out of a tiny

¹⁵¹ Coltan is short for columbite–tantalite, a metallic ore used in the manufacture of electronic products such as cell phones.

¹⁵² The definition of "cited images" is discussed in Chapter One.

¹⁵³ The term "uninformed viewer" is used here to refer to those who rely on the stereotypical images of girl soldiers provided by the media.

window, a child under a shelter made of torn material and rags, a man leaning on a patchwork-shack, women sitting under a dilapidated shelter, a woman sitting in an elevated shack full of huge holes, women cooking on open fires, a close-up of feet wearing slippers made from plastic bottles, and a child standing behind a shelf with a few tins of food that look like they are for sale but with no one buying. The community is clearly presented within the context of what Scott Gates and Simon Reich refer to as “vulnerable populations” (2010: 9). Gates and Reich point out that children are particularly more likely to be engaged in wars in poor communities (2010: 7), but *War Witch* takes that idea to an extreme level of hopelessness so that there can be no doubt what the represented community stands for. When we finally see Komona playing alone in a very dirty environment, there is no doubt that she is doomed. And, at this point, she is just an anonymous African girl in an African village.

Although the film uses elements of magic realism later on, the film is introduced within the realist mode that emphasises its link to reality.¹⁵⁴ There is a strong sense of reality created through the rawness that comes from shooting on location in a war-torn country, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the use of mostly non-professional Congolese actors.¹⁵⁵ Mike Scott, a film reviewer, even declares that *War Witch* ‘feels like history playing out before our eyes’ (2012), although he does not clarify from whose perspective such history is constructed.

¹⁵⁴ Magic realism can be defined as any artistic style ‘in which realistic narrative and naturalistic technique are combined with surreal elements of dream or fantasy’ (*English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, 2017).

¹⁵⁵ According to Nguyen, Rachel Mwanza, the girl who plays Komona, ‘was a street child in Kinshasa’ (in Loranger, 2012).

In what seems like an acknowledgement that the views presented in the film may not necessarily represent the views of girl soldiers, Nguyen says, ‘one must write about what one feels, rather than what one knows’ (in an interview with Anne-Christine Loranger, 2012). But he also emphasises that his goal was to present the girl’s perspective by saying, ‘the idea of the film was to project myself into the eyes of this child’ (ibid.). The result is that the film draws the viewers into the story through familiar images, so that they can explore the possibly unfamiliar experiences of a girl soldier.

The Girl’s Voice

Even as Nguyen presents us with what he “feels,” or perhaps a combination of various perspectives, the impression is that it is the perspective of the girl soldier. The film’s use of a first-person narrator, in the form of Komona’s voice, enables it to provide what Margherita Sprio describes as ‘a vision of reality with no claim to a monopoly on truth’ (2016: 166). The experiences presented and the interpretations thereof, are, to an extent, not represented as general, but specific to this girl.

We hear Komona’s voice speaking to her unborn child saying, ‘...I have to tell you how I became a soldier with the rebels. ... because it’s very important that you know what I did...’ The determination in the voice indicates that the owner is ready to talk about her experience, hinting at the fact that the representation of the girl soldier in the film is coming from a position of strength. When discussing the approach that a team of researchers took when selecting former girl soldiers for interviews, Michael G. Wessells mentions that they only chose those who were considered to ‘be in a position to talk’ (2010: 188). Readiness to talk was seen as an indication that the former girl soldiers were ‘doing relatively well’ emotionally (ibid.). But the fact that Komona is speaking to an unborn child might indicate

that she is not ready to speak about her experiences more publicly or to another living person. Also, there is a certain implied “honesty” in the sense that she is speaking to someone who will not remember what she says and therefore there is no reason to lie, unless the lying is directed at oneself.

Speaking to her unborn child also implies that Komona is still processing her emotions, and, as the audience, we are eavesdropping on a private communication. The absence of an implied audience suggests that we are probably about to hear the gory details that a girl soldier may not be willing to admit to anyone. That is, we are about to witness something that we do not already know. And yet, the beginning of her story presents what Garuba and Himmelman (2012) would call “cited images”: rebels attack her village, she is forced to kill her parents and then she is abducted. This representation might be disappointing in its lack of novelty, and yet it may also, to an extent, be satisfying in its familiarity. The stereotypical nature of the girl’s recruitment into the rebel group suggests that the film is taking a humanitarian perspective regarding issues to do with the moral responsibility of the girl soldier: she cannot be held responsible for whatever she did in the war because she was forced to join the rebel group. In addition, although this representation may be stereotypical, it is not necessarily unreal. The abduction of girls, or child soldiers in general, is common in some war zones in Africa, although not in all zones. For instance, Wessells points out that in Angola girls were mostly abducted whereas in Mozambique and Ethiopia some girls decided to join the war in order to liberate their societies (2010: 196-197).

However, despite the reality of some girls being kidnapped and forced into rebel groups, the film’s lack of context creates a sense that it is subordinating the girl’s voice within a certain ideological framing. As Wessells argues, ‘methods of recruitment are highly contextual and

varied,' and depend on 'cultural norms, armed group's situation and objectives, and levels of civilian support for the fighting' (2010: 197). We learn that the abductions are partly because the rebels have more guns than they have soldiers when, on return to their base camp, one of the rebels announces that they have ten kids and twenty AK-47s. The lack of civilian support is indicated by the general lack of contact between the rebels and civilians. The rebels only go into villages to attack. But we do not have the context that comes with a specific war in a specific space and time, as is the case with the Eritrean war in *Heart of Fire*. As such, although the presented girl soldier's experience may have some unique elements, it is presented within the context of generalised African conditions.

The use of abduction as a method of recruitment also sets up the film within the worst-case-scenario approach to the representation of girl soldiers. Patricia A. Maulden states that the level of sexual, physical and emotional abuse that girl soldiers suffer seems to correlate to the recruitment type, among other things such as the armed group's philosophy (2011: 69). That is, 'abduction coincides with extreme abuse ... while recruitment via propaganda or persuasion can be accompanied by a policy of limited male/female contact or even a practice of gender equality' (ibid.). We can see this in the differences between the representations in *Flame* and *War Witch*. Although there are many forms of gendered abuse in *Flame*, the experiences of the girl soldiers are not as brutal as those in *War Witch*. For example, where girls in *Flame* are able to demand training, girls in *War Witch* can only take whatever they can get. The abuse that Komona suffers from recruitment continues as she begins life as a soldier. Thus, the suffering of the girl soldier becomes a significant aspect in framing the war.

Framing the War

Komona describes the activities of the rebels as a war, but, without any clear idea of what the objectives of the fighting parties are, it is difficult to put a label on what exactly is happening, although it clearly involves some fierce gun battles. After Komona kills her parents, the rebel who ordered her to do so tells her that she is now a rebel, but without clarifying to what end. The training of the new soldiers only involves being shown how to hold a gun and where the trigger is. The first time we see the warlord, Great Tiger, is when Komona meets him for the first time. He gives her, as a gift, a gun that he claims has magic powers, but never gives any inkling of what the war is hoping to achieve or his political views, if he has any. While this may give the impression of the representation of a stereotypical “pointless” African postcolonial war, it also portrays the warlord more as a criminal than as motivated by political goals.

Gates and Reich point out that some ‘literature on violence have discussed the similarities between the behaviour of warlords and the leadership of criminal gangs’ (2010: 8). *War Witch* seems to draw from this theory to suggest that, as Gates and Reich note, ‘criminal leaders often play a significant role in the dynamics of armed conflict, motivated by drug trade or the control of natural resources’ (2010: 6). Great Tiger’s camp is right where the coltan mine is, emphasising its significance to him and to the war. Even Komona, as young as she is, concludes that coltan is very important to the continuation of the war. She mentions how a rebel who was caught stealing coltan was buried alive in the ground with his head hanging out on the surface so that everyone watched as he died a very slow and painful death. It took him three days to die. But the film’s representation of the rest of the community, which shall be discussed later, ensures that the warlord is less a fact of the African norm and more an outlier who operates outside of the generally accepted rules and values.

Komona also speaks about how she and the other members of her unit managed to defeat government soldiers who ‘wanted to steal the Coltan from Great Tiger.’ Komona’s use of the word “steal” here is very revealing in terms of the way the war is framed. It should be noted that the film was shot in the Democratic Republic of Congo, whose war has generally been regarded by scholarly researchers as sustained by greed rather than grievance (Lischer, 2010: 152). This conclusion was reached on the basis that ‘all parties to the conflict pillage natural resources such as diamonds, gold, copper, and coltan,’ and also, ‘for the most part, the combatants aim to terrorize civilians, not to win them over to any particular ideology or political program’ (ibid.). A lot of what we see in the film is influenced by the shooting location. For instance, when speaking about the use of magic in the film, Nguyen implies that it was partly inspired by the culture in the Democratic Republic of Congo where ‘there is an omnipresent, daily interaction with magic, with spirituality’ (in an interview with Lorenger, 2012). But, although Komona’s language implies that the government soldiers are no better than the warlord, there is a possibility that she is only speaking using the language that was used by the rebels. The language indicates how they were able to morally justify defending the mine so ferociously at the expense of many lives, thus hinting at the brainwashed state she was in.

In the film, brainwashing is the tool used to gain and maintain loyalty. The abducted children are given sticks that symbolise guns, and told that the guns are now their mother and father. When they are eventually given real guns, it happens in an elaborate ceremony involving a shaman that seems to cement the relationship between a child and his/her gun. When asked why he chose to involve a shaman, Nguyen, in an interview with Anne-Christine Loranger (2012), said:

...it is not so different from the great powers of the world. During the crusades, one needed a king who was representative of God. One needed a dogma and doctrines to convince people to go and die in the name of something. It is as if our real world was not sufficient to convince people that it is necessary to kill. A paradise had to be invented that the warriors deserved only if they fought in the name of God. This is exactly the same thing. I exaggerate a bit, but the logical principle is very similar.

Thus, although the presence of the shaman may be seen as the representation of the colonial stereotype of African barbarism, it is also symbolic of the deliberate manipulation of vulnerable children. This sort of manipulation, as Nguyen indicates, is not uniquely African, although the methods may differ.

In another scene we see Magician, one of the film's main characters and Komona's friend, pretend to read a book, telling the children that the book is about Great Tiger, the warlord. Magician "reads" that when Great Tiger 'was saying his prayers at noon, in the sun, he came onto 30 elephants. But because of his magic he was able to fight the elephants.' He also explains to the children that Great Tiger's name comes from the fact that 'his magic is so strong that he can even eat men.' For the children, Great Tiger is elevated to the status of a legendary figure whom they should greatly fear. The children in the camp are also shown action movies that glorify gun-fighting. The possibility that they do not understand the English used in the films suggests that they get to watch the violence without necessarily having access to the narrative that contextualises it.

But the film also indicates that brainwashing works for some children, but not all children. Magician is clearly not past Type I internalisation.¹⁵⁶ Perhaps his participation in the brainwashing of other children, for instance, through storytelling and pretend-reading, makes him aware of the illusions that go into constructing Great Tiger as an all-powerful leader. After a fierce battle with government soldiers in which only him, Komona and another boy survive, Magician convinces Komona that they should run away. Komona refuses to go at first, but Magician explains to her that in the end either the government soldiers or Great Tiger himself will kill her when she fails to perform as well as expected; Great Tiger had already killed three witches before Komona. Perhaps it is easier to convince Komona because earlier on in the film she had witnessed Great Tyger executing his own soldier. But there are hints in the film indicating that Komona and Magician do not quite fit in with the rebels. For example, in the scene where they watch the action film with the gunfights, all the other children seem excited and invested in the outcome of the film except the two of them. In another scene, while the rest of the rebels sing and dance after emerging as the victors in a battle with government soldiers, Komona sits quietly alone.

Magician, however, fails to convince the other boy to escape with them. The boy even threatens to shoot Magician if he forces him to go with them. Magician tells the boy that he has lost his mind and that “they” have made him crazy, indicating that even as a child himself, he is aware of the effects of brainwashing, and realises that the boy is far gone.

When Komona and Magician leave the war, we see villagers going about their ordinary business. The war, therefore, is not represented as fully embedded into the everyday of village life. In that way, the film is able to offer hope for the girl within the African

¹⁵⁶ Type I internalisation is discussed in Chapter Two.

community. That is, the girl and the community are not irretrievably doomed. In that sense, the film challenges the Afro-pessimistic views that offer an escape to Europe as the only viable solution. However, the film is unable to offer a lasting solution for the girl since, by the end of the film, the war is still not over. As Scott Gates and Simon Reich note, ‘the fundamental problem is armed conflict itself’ (2010: 5). The fact that the first time that Komona escapes from the rebel group she is hunted down and kidnapped again means that her future remains uncertain. And also, even though Komona manages to escape for the second time, elsewhere girls are still being kidnapped and turned into rebels. In a way, therefore, Komona’s experience becomes symbolic of the circumstances many other girls find themselves in because of the war.

The (Ab)use of Girl Soldiers

War Witch makes the point that, as noted by Michael G. Wessells, girls’ recruitment is not an accidental phenomenon but a deliberate strategy (2010: 191). In the scene in which Komona’s village is attacked, Komona is singled out, among many other members of her village, to kill her parents. There is the possibility that it appears as if she was singled out because the story is from her perspective and she does not know what was happening to the others, but her experience still indicates that she was targeted specifically. Girls are often targeted for recruitment in wars for a variety of reason. For instance, in addition to combat duties, they are often seen as having the ability to carry heavy loads for long distances, which can be useful in cases where the rebels are unable or cannot use noisy mechanised vehicles for fear of detection (Wessells, 2010: 190). Girls are also deliberately recruited for sexual exploitation (Wessells, 2010: 191). Although sexual exploitation only comes in later on in the film, Komona is used to carry heavy loads as well as to fight in combat. Therefore, through

using Komona's perspective, the film is able to provide a gendered view of the girl soldier's experiences.

As a girl, the only way that Komona manages to become a valuable member of the highly male dominated rebel community is through having special powers. After a battle in which she is the only one from her village to survive, the rebels begin to believe that she is a witch, and can tell 'where the demons from the government [are] hiding in the forest.' This label offers her protection, but at the same time makes her too valuable to lose, something that turns out to be a liability when she is hunted down after escaping. The label also creates high expectations as she is taken to the warlord, Great Tiger, and expected to help him win the war. However, her value still means she is only a tool for the war rather than a respected member of the leadership. She still has to perform hard labour by working in the coltan mines, although she is able to occasionally take some unsanctioned breaks because anyone who tries to hurt her 'would risk getting killed.' She even has time to play a little and catch some crickets.¹⁵⁷

Nguyen is careful not to foreground the issue of rape, only bringing it into the picture in the second half of the film. Mazurana et al. note that in 'quotes and anecdotes used in reports,' the mention of girls is often 'relegated to worst-case scenarios of sexual violence, which highlight girls as "wives," rewards for soldiers' valour, or victims of sexual terror' (2002: 100). In his film, Nguyen does not focus exclusively on sexual abuse, a subject that, although too important to be completely ignored, 'has often obscured the complexity of [young women's] roles and experiences in armed conflicts' (Honwana, 2006: 76). Also, instead of

¹⁵⁷ Nguyen describes this scene as 'just Rachel catching crickets' because they saw her collecting crickets in-between takes and decided to shoot (in Morales, 2012). This comment emphasises that the child in Komona is not very different from the child in Rachel, although their life experiences are different.

seeing the actual gruesome act of rape, we only realise Komona was sexually abused because she is pregnant, and she explains that she was forced to be the commander's wife. Mike Scott (2013) praises Nguyen saying that:

The horrors that befall Komona are never played for sensationalistic effect. They never feel cheap or exploitative. Rather, they feel real and authoritatively told. And that magnifies the horror immensely.

Thus, even if we do not see the rape on screen, its horror is not minimised.

Narratively speaking, it makes sense that the gruesome details of the experiences of rape are not visualised on screen. Details of rape are certainly something that a mother is unlikely to divulge to her child, even if the child is not yet born. But this approach also allows the film to avoid privileging one horrible experience over other equally horrible experiences such as having to deal with unwanted pregnancies. That is, the film does not presume to know how girl soldiers rank their experiences.

Unwanted pregnancies are highlighted as one of the many issues that girl soldiers have to deal with, a situation made worse because the pregnancies usually arise out of rape. The issue of how to deal with having a child out of forced sex is a theme that runs throughout the film. It is in fact what instigates Komona's desire to tell her story; she does not know if she will be able to love the baby once it is born. Children born out of rape sometimes have to suffer the consequences of being 'branded as "undesired," "children of bad memories," or "children of hate"' (Mazurana et al., 2002: 115). The film resolves this moral quandary through the fact that Komona does not throw the baby into the river after it is born as she once mentions as an

option. But this does not necessarily resolve the conflicted emotions that she may have towards the child. Raising a child is a long process and the film ends soon after the baby is born. Taylor-Jones suggests that motherhood becomes the method through which [Komona is] asked to move forward with [her life]' (2016: 187). That is, the film adopts a socially acceptable solution that stereotypes women as mothers and nurtures. This approach does not fully acknowledge the effects that such a situation has on the former girl soldier.

In addition to the issues of rape and unwanted pregnancies, the film also takes time to explore the issue of girls' sexuality. This ensures that when Komona is raped, the tragedy is not that she has sex, but that she is sexually abused. After Komona and Magician escape from the rebels, Magician tells Komona that he loves her and wants to marry her. Komona tells him that if he wants to marry her he should prove himself worthy by finding her a white rooster.¹⁵⁸ Magician goes on the hunt for the white rooster, which proves to be very difficult to find. While this section provides some comic relief, it also serves to prove that Magician is unlike the stereotypical boy soldiers who would have forced Komona into marriage. He eventually finds the rooster and they get married. Kate Taylor-Jones notes that with regards to Komona and Magician, the film safely maintains 'the boundaries of innocence and sexual permissiveness' (2016: 185). Komona and Magician only engage in sexual intercourse after getting married, and we never see that onscreen. As Taylor-Jones concludes, Komona's 'rape at the hands of the commander who murders Magician and takes Komona for his bush wife is not only a violation of the rights of a child but also an act against the sanctity of marriage' (2016: 185). Thus, the issue of rape in the film is not dealt with in a way that represses girls' sexuality.

¹⁵⁸ This is what her father told her she should say to boys who ask to marry her. The fact that she takes her father's advice seriously provides a sense of intergenerational continuity despite the war.

Although Taylor-Jones argues that ultimately *War Witch* ‘resorts to the three specifically gendered roles [Komona] plays – sex slave, wife, and daughter – as her most defining elements’ (2016: 188), *War Witch*’s significance lies in its more holistic approach towards the representation of the girl soldier. For instance, Komona’s role as wife does not exempt her from combat duties, making it clear that providing sexual services for the male soldiers is an extra burden for girls. Nguyen describes Komona as a “ten-dimensional” and paradoxical figure, adding that ‘she’s a child but she’s an adult, she’s a killer and a victim, she’s a mother but she’s a child’ (in an interview with Morales, 2012). This sets Komona apart from being a stereotypical girl soldier. But although the film gives Komona some agency, it maintains that, as Maulden argues, girl soldiers often ‘pay an exceptionally high price for both their age and their gender’ (2011: 76).

The Girl Killer

There are stories of child soldiers who were forced to kill their parents (Honwana, 2006). But in her fieldwork, Chris Coulter discovered that women rarely discussed ‘their direct experiences of killing in any detail’ (2008: 60). Echoing this discovery, Susan McKay states that girls are reluctant to divulge their involvement in violent acts when they leave military groups because they usually do not wish to admit to ‘roles that violate broader community and gender norms’ (2005: 389). Hiding the nature of their actions during war is particularly important for girls because, as Maulden (2011) states, girl killers are overwhelmingly judged more harshly than boys. Maulden notes that ‘girl perpetrators’ often shift back to the captive category once they surrendered their guns (2011: 71). This is made easy by the fact that people often have a difficult time to believe that ‘a girl child could kill and maim without apparent difficulty’ (ibid.). In his research, Wessells found that the girls they spoke to preferred to be called “forcibly involved girls” and not “former girl soldiers,” a term which

they saw as suggesting that they participated in the war voluntarily (2010: 187). However, Komona refers to her role in the war as that of a soldier, indicating that she wishes to confront the violence implied in that title.

Komona's willingness to assume some responsibility for her actions indicates that she does not see herself just as a passive victim; she is also an actor. She has agency in the sense described by Maulden: she has the 'capacity for making meaning out of existing circumstances ... and making decisions for action in ways that matter to [her]' (2011: 71). Right from the beginning, the film indicates that it is not going to be simply one of those stories that Kenneth Harrow refers to as the "they made me do it" narratives (2013: 2).¹⁵⁹ But, as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the film takes the position that rebel commanders systematically subvert the moral agency of child soldiers, thus minimising their moral responsibility.

Komona is forced to work as a guard, protecting the coltan mine from invaders. We see Komona killing a man, a government soldier, who is clearly trying to escape rather than confront her; she shoots him in the back as he runs away. This scene can be contrasted to the one in *Heart of Fire* where Awet decides to let the "enemy" go rather than pull the trigger. But, of course, the decision on whether or not to pull the trigger is not really Komona's because the attack is at the command of Great Tiger, the warlord. At the end of the battle with the government soldiers, Great Tiger, as the ultimate authority, shouts that it is time to celebrate their victory, and the celebrations begin. When he notices Komona sitting alone quietly, Great Tiger draws her into the crowd, and has someone carry her on his shoulders, technically forcing her to participate in the celebrations. We are therefore meant to view

¹⁵⁹ As discussed in Chapter Two.

Komona as having ‘a diminished capacity for morally responsible agency,’ and acting ‘in conditions that further [diminish her] personal responsibility for [her] action in war,’ to use Jeff McMahan’s (2010: 34) words.

Komona is also traumatised by the violence that surrounds her, which highlights her status as a victim. She explains that “magic milk,” the drug they are introduced to, makes them see ghosts. Although the film never makes it clear whether the ghosts are hallucinations or real, they are clearly part of a copying mechanism because they enable her to avoid seeing the reality of violent deaths. Nguyen clarifies that he wanted to visually show ‘how she tames violence’ (in Morales, 2012).¹⁶⁰ In the immediate aftermath of battles, instead of bloody bodies on the ground, Komona only sees ghosts, in the form of people covered in white paint. Komona explains that seeing ghosts helps her to do the job because when she sees ghosts she does not see ‘the red meat leaking red on the ground.’ And to emphasise how much death she witnessed, she says ‘there are many, many ghosts here. You wouldn’t believe. Too many ghosts.’ But she goes on to say even when she sleeps, she sees ghosts inside her head, thus indicating that the drugs and the copying mechanism do not make her immune to the trauma.

The only killing that Komona carries out without any direct or implied order is that of the commander who rapes and impregnates her. When planning her escape, Komona decides she has to kill the commander before she leaves. Killing their rapists is something that former girl soldiers have admitted to doing. In an interview, a former girl soldier from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) says that ‘we tried to prevent [the boys from committing rapes] but if they are doped it’s difficult, so sometimes you must kill them. If you can’t kill them at this time, well you kill them when you are on the front line’ (in Brett and Specht, 2004: 98).

¹⁶⁰ Nguyen also explains that using ghosts instead of showing dead bodies was also meant to protect the young actors from the trauma of seeing blood and gore (in Morales, 2012).

Although such killings are sometimes premeditated, they can still be morally justified by the circumstances of the war; the girls are not in a position to seek any other form of justice. Also, as Jeff McMahan argues, a person is morally justified in attacking his/her attacker, and the attacker ‘will not be wronged by [the] action,’ even if they are killed (2010: 29).

In order to kill her rapist and abuser, Komona turns herself into what she calls a “poisoned rose.” That is, she places a razor blade into the seed of an avocado and then inserts the seed into her vagina. Her mode of attack is clearly a gendered one and, due to the nature of one of the commander’s crimes, reminds the viewer that he is simply getting what he deserves; his abusive act becomes his downfall. The commander’s death is further justified by the fact that he is the same person who ordered Komona to kill her parents. He is also the one who killed Magician. And, to emphasise that Komona’s conscience is clear, she never sees his ghost.

War Witch demonstrates that killing may be the only way for the girl soldier to escape being a victim. And, although girl killers may not be defined by a lack of agency, the fact of killing does not necessarily make them evil. As Arvin Temkar argues, Komona’s ‘innocence, though shattered, is not completely exhausted’ (2013). The film encourages communities to consider the circumstances before judging girl soldiers. Additionally, the film emphasises the significance of the community for the well-being of girl soldiers and former girl soldiers.

Family, Friendship and Community

Magician, the boy soldier who marries Komona, plays a significant role in subverting child soldier gender expectations. Magician is a kind hearted and considerate boy, especially considering the circumstances. He offers Komona his share of biscuits, even though food is

very scarce.¹⁶¹ Also, although he is quite taken by Komona, he does not impose himself on her.¹⁶² Later on, he gives her a “grigri” or magic protection, demonstrating that he cares for her deeply. Wessells notes that friendship and solidarity are significant ‘positive aspects of life inside the armed groups’ as they provided a ‘basis for the girls’ resilience’ (2010: 193). Thus, Magician’s character represents something positive during Komona’s extremely difficult times.

Significantly, it is Magician who provides Komona with a new sense of family by introducing her to his uncle, The Butcher. After Komona and Magician get married, Magician takes Komona to live with The Butcher. The uncle is representative of an alternative masculinity. He hates the war and violence. Komona tells her unborn child that it has something to do with what happened to his family. When Komona and Magician arrive, The Butcher’s only greeting is: ‘are you finished with the war?’ This is a rather tense moment because it is almost as if he believes Magician chose to be in the war. In that instance, the film challenges the assumption that all child soldiers join the war in the same way, that is, through abduction. However, we never find out how Magician joined the war.

Despite his terse response to Magician and Komona’s arrival, The Butcher takes away their guns, telling them that they do not need them anymore, a gesture that symbolises that he is allowing them to stay. Once again, the film subverts expectations. In some societies, ‘individuals who fought in wars or lived in military camps are seen as vehicles through which the unquiet spirits of the war dead can enter and afflict entire communities’ (Honwana, 2006:

¹⁶¹ We see boys fighting over biscuits because they have not eaten in three days.

¹⁶² The fact that Magician does not divulge his romantic interest in Komona may be because, as Susan McKay indicates, in some groups boys may not be allowed ‘to sexually approach girls and women until they attain rank, such as a commander, within the rebel force’ (2005: 391).

106). But Magician and Komona are accepted by The Butcher and within the wider community without any visible or explicit expressions of stigma.

Additionally, the film provides the viewer with an alternative African community that is unlike Komona's original village. Compared to Komona's village, The Butcher's village is economically better off and more productive. People are usually working, whether it is the butcher cutting his meat or some villagers extracting oil from nuts. Komona and Magician are integrated into this community, and they are happy. But this only lasts until the rebels find them. Komona is taken back but Magician is chopped down with a machete after Komona refuses to shoot him. Komona's refusal to shoot Magician enables her to reclaim a sense of self and demonstrate that she is no longer the same child they kidnapped the first time around. She refuses to once again be forced to kill her family.

When Komona escapes for the second time, she finds herself at the mercy of the community again. She goes to the hospital, but because she shows up with a gun, refuses to let it go and fires some shots, she is arrested. However, the police officer on guard takes pity on her and sets her free, even taking her to The Butcher's home. This police officer contrasts the image of government authorities we get in Komona's earlier description of the government soldiers who wanted to steal Great Tiger's coltan. Thus, even though the government might be corrupt, it still has some descent individuals.

When Komona reaches The Butcher's home, an elderly woman removes the avocado seed with the razor blade that she had inserted into her vagina. The woman also offers her emotional support, even though she thinks Komona should not have done what she did because she risked the baby's life. According to Maulden, studies have shown that

community reaction to returning boy soldiers is mixed while ‘the reaction to girls is overwhelmingly negative’ (2011: 76). But Komona is embraced by her second family. The Butcher asks her to stay, telling her that she is like a daughter to him.

But then, it does not seem anyone is ready to deal with Komona’s post-traumatic disorder, which rears its ugly head. The fact that this time around Komona suffers from severe post-traumatic disorder may indicate that her experiences after she was kidnapped for the second time were more severe. However, it may also be an indication that, because Magician is dead, she no longer has the same emotional support that she had through the understanding she shared with him. She has nightmares in which she violently asks for her gun. The last straw for her is when she chokes the old woman who is helping to look after her. After this incident, she runs away from home. The film makes it clear that it is not her new family that rejects her; The Butcher chases after her but he is no match for Komona’s guerrilla skills.

Komona decides to go to her original village because she believes that if she properly buries her parents the nightmares will stop. She also believes that if she has the baby before burying her parents, the baby will be punished for all the bad things she has done. She had earlier on tried to seek help from a religious prophet, but it did not work. In a way, the film takes on an Afrocentric approach to reintegration. Honwana (2006: 106) points out that in some African communities:

After a war, when soldiers and refugees return home, cleansing or purification rituals are a fundamental condition for individual and collective healing and protection. They are also important means of conflict resolution, reconciliation, and social reintegration of war-affected persons.

Some communities also perform rituals aimed at ‘quieting the spirits of the war dead who were not buried with proper rituals and on venerating the spirits of the ancestors who guarantee health and protection to kin-groups and villages’ (Honwana, 2006: 106). Thus, in Komona’s insistence on performing the burial ritual, the film emphasises the importance of these symbolic acts that enable communities to cope with trauma.

However, these rituals are often performed by adults and not children. In some African cultures, for example, in Angola, ‘children are not allowed to participate in burials because they are regarded as especially vulnerable to affliction by the spirits of the dead, including their own relatives’ (Honwana, 2006: 107). But Honwana notes that in some cultures when one or both parents die, children are permitted to participate in the burial proceedings (2006: 107). They may, for instance, be ‘permitted to say a few words, to express their sadness, and to ask for their parents’ forgiveness for any wrongdoing or problem they may have caused them in the past’ (Honwana, 2006: 107). But the rituals are still led by adults who know the procedures to follow. When Komona reaches her village, and realises that there is nothing to bury, she does not seem to know what to do. This highlights the significant destruction of social norms and spiritual life brought on by the war. She eventually decides to bury a piece of cloth and an old comb, things that belonged to her parents. In this way, the burial becomes more symbolic than a literal event. Despite this compromise, her parents’ ghosts still leave. In this sense, the film acknowledges that the way ‘people understand and give meaning to their afflictions and problems is generally linked to their culture and world views’ (Brett and Specht, 2004: 22).

Scott Gates and Simon Reich note that typically child soldiers are ‘unable to reintegrate into their former communities’ (2010: 5), but for Komona this becomes irrelevant because there is no one there anymore. She decides to head back to The Butcher’s home. With Komona leaving her village, the film makes a point that, as Wessells has observed, “reintegration” does not necessarily have to mean ‘going back to one’s village of origin and to a life that existed before’ (2010: 194). In war situations, the past is often destroyed beyond repair or retrieval. But overall, the film proposes that the community is very important to the well-being of former girl soldiers.

When Komona is walking along the road on her way to The Butcher’s, a lorry carrying many other people in the back stops and the driver invites her to get in, even though she does not have any money to pay for her fare. When she climbs into the back of the lorry, a woman offers to look after her baby while she rests. The involvement of this woman, as well as the involvement of the older woman at The Butcher’s home, is in line with Susan McKay’s suggestion that ‘a key strategy in working with [former girl soldiers] is to enlist the leadership of women elders to talk and listen to their stories and assist them in learning or re-learning normal behaviour’ (2005: 395).

War Witch is therefore mostly hopeful in its representation of the relationship between children and adults. Maulden notes that often when children are forced to perpetrate violence against members of their family or community, ‘the link between child, family, and community breaks down,’ and the child, ‘by default, forms a stronger connection with the armed faction’ (2011: 73). *War Witch* seems to emphasise the need for community to maintain a strong link with former child soldiers as this provides a significant way of alleviating the effects of war on these children. Even Komona’s parents seem to maintain the

link to their child in death; they continue to play their protective role as “ghosts.”¹⁶³ Thus, the film does not represent African adults as absent. It is only that they cannot really do anything to stop the war.¹⁶⁴

Girl Soldier as Survivor and Hero

Through her experiences, Komona learns how to survive. Komona might even be a heroine, but certainly not in the same way that the sixteen-year-old girl Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012) is. Sarah Maya Rosen and David M. Rosen suggest that *The Hunger Games* ‘recalls some of the most graphic horrors of children killing children found in eyewitness testimony before the Special Court in Sierra Leone in the aftermath of the Sierra Leone Civil War’ (2012: 310). But, unlike Katniss, Komona is burdened by the label “child soldier” and all the negative connotations that comes with the label, and this overshadows her heroism. According to Rosen and Rosen, the *New York Times* hailed Katniss as ‘one of the most radical female characters to appear in American movies’ (2012: 311). When describing Katniss, Manohla Dargis of the *New York Times* writes that she ‘is a teenage survivalist...When she runs through that forest, and even when she falls, there’s something of the American frontiersman in her, as if she were Natty Bumppo reborn and resexed’ (Dargis, 2012). On the other hand, Stephen Holden, in his *New York Times* review of *War Witch*, focuses on ‘the horrors Komona witnesses and perpetuates’ (2013), rather than her survival skills. This is not surprising because, as Susan McKay states, ‘girls’ efficacy, actions, resistance, and survival skills within fighting forces are inadequately appreciated’ (2005: 386).

¹⁶³ The first time Komona sees her parents’ ghosts, she is in the battle front and the ghosts tell her to run just before the enemy starts firing, and thus saving her life.

¹⁶⁴ The representation of African adults as unable to end the war can be seen as framed within the neo-colonial context which calls for Euro-American intervention in the name of the girl child.

Komona is not a hero because she saves others or defeats the evil warlord like Katnis. Rather, she is a hero because she survives through her own actions and manages to pick herself up. She is a hero because her resilience is inspiring. However, in the end, Komona is not celebrated as a hero. Her identity as victim and survivor seem to take on greater significance. Perhaps it would have been unrealistically optimistic to imagine that the war ends and Komona experiences some level of peace and stability. After all, research has found that the majority of countries which have experienced civil war remain insecure during peace time and some of them experience war again because the problems that led to the war in the first place are usually not resolved (Gates and Reich, 2010). For instance, the war in Angola, although ‘punctuated with intermittent phases of relative stability, lasted forty years’ (Wessells, 2010: 186). But what is significant for this study is that Komona does not get the last word. Taylor-Jones points out that although Komona acts ‘as narrator throughout the film; at the end she is silent and unable to offer any insight into her future or her fate as the voices of the male musicians take over’ (Taylor-Jones, 2016: 186). Thus, in the end, her voice is silenced, and we simply watch from the camera’s “objective” perspective as the truck Komona is in drives into the distance. But the film still provides a unique and insightful exploration of the experiences of girl soldiers.

Conclusion

War Witch challenges the stereotypical representations of girl soldiers without completely alienating the “uninformed” viewer by combining familiar and unfamiliar images. For example, the film presents stereotypical images of an African village, and employs kidnap as the method with which Komona, the girl soldier, is recruited by the rebels. However, within that familiarity, the film explores the experiences of the girl soldier through a first-person

voice-over narration that offers a unique perspective. This unique perspective challenges the stereotypical view of the girl as a helpless victim. The film represents its main character, Komona, as having some agency. The film also goes beyond the physical to explore the emotional and psychological effects that participating in war has on the girl. The film takes on an Afrocentric approach in terms of the way the girl soldier deals with her psychological problems. However, Komona, unlike the Sarafinas (in *Sarafina!*) and the Florences (in *Flame*) of the old wars, is still largely a victim of war. Her main goal is not to challenge the system and fight for justice, but to survive within that system because she cannot do anything to change it. Thus, Komona is still represented within the familiar humanitarian framework that limits the agency of girl soldiers and emphasises their ultimate need to be rescued.

After having analysed the representations of girl soldiers in the four case study films, the next Chapter outlines the overall conclusion reached from such analysis. The chapter also draws on the theoretical framework discussed in Chapters One and Two.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

I used a sociological approach to analyse the filmic representations of girls who participate in African political conflicts. The sociological approach enabled me to analyse the case study films, *Sarafina!*, *Flame*, *Heart of Fire* and *War Witch*, within specific historical contexts. The reason I chose this approach was that films which represent child soldiers or children who participate in African political conflicts often provide strong links to actual historical experiences through, for example, representing fictionalised accounts of real historical experiences and/or using realist film techniques. This is the case with all the case study films used in the thesis. *Sarafina!* is based on the experiences of South African youths during the youth uprisings of the 1970s and 1980s. *Flame* is based on the oral histories of former girl soldiers, and Teresa Barnes (2007) has argued that the film should be considered as a record of history. *Heart of Fire* is inspired by a memoir written by a former girl soldier. And *War Witch* is based on extensive research which included interviews with former child soldiers. As a result, these films have the potential to influence the ways in which the girls they represent are imagined. The films also reflect ways of thinking, dominant or otherwise, about girl soldiers.

Previous studies indicate that girls are often overlooked in studies and representations of African wars (Honwana, 2006; Taylor-Jones, 2016). This thesis looked at the very few films that focus on girls who participate in African political conflicts. It considered whether these films offer the perspectives of the girls they seek to represent. The study is influenced by the idea that there is a significant power disparity between child soldiers, including girls, and

those who seek to represent them on film. The result is that child soldiers do not have much say in the ways that they are represented. The way girls who participate in African conflicts are imagined in films is not always the way they imagine themselves and the societies within which they live.

What this study sought to establish are the factors that influence the representations of girl soldiers on film. The study also sought to establish the differences or similarities between the voices of girls who participate in African political conflicts and their representations on film. The idea was not to claim any position of authenticity because histories and memories are all constructions, and do not provide direct access to the “real.”

The thesis takes its cue from voices such as those in the book *Hollywood's Africa After 1994* (2012), edited by MaryEllen Higgins, which consider the representations of African identities within the context of colonial and neo-colonial histories. To this global context, is added the localised socio-political and economic contexts. The main conclusion is that the filmic representations of girls who participate in African political conflicts are largely based on the perspectives of those external to their societies and experiences. The filmmakers are often adult, male, Euro-American or economically privileged filmmakers. While this does not necessarily mean the perspectives of the girls are overlooked, the case is often that their perspectives are subordinated to dominant ideas or ideological frameworks that are shaped through local and global politics.

On a local level, girls who participate in African political conflicts are marginalised as children and as girls, and, on a global level, their identity as Africans also adds to their marginality. Films, especially those that focus on postcolonial conflicts, reflect such

marginalisation through the adoption of the humanitarian discourse through which the images of the underprivileged Africans are often constructed.

I hoped to demonstrate the significance of the influence of local and global social, economic, political and other interests on the way girls who participate in African political conflicts are imagined. This is important because films are an important mode of communication. Films such as the four analysed in this thesis potentially play a significant role in shaping people's views about African political conflicts as well as the roles and experiences of those affected by them.

Although this study focuses on the representations of a specific group, it can be applied broadly to representations in which the privileged represent less privileged groups. That is, this study belongs within the category of studies that focus on the representations of subaltern voices.

The author acknowledges that the study is not without its limitations. Some of the limitations are outlined below, together with recommendations for further research.

Limitations of this Study and Recommendations for Further Research

I am not a former girl soldier. As such, the perspectives offered through this study are largely influenced by experiences, cultural or otherwise, that are external to those of girl soldiers or former girl soldiers. I hope that the incorporation of information and quotations from former girl soldiers helped to counter some of the implications of this, but perhaps a meaningful

collaboration with a former girl soldier in conducting the study would have been more helpful.

Due to limited time, financial and other resources, I was not able to conduct my own interviews with filmmakers, audiences and former girl soldiers. As a result, the study relied on interviews conducted by other researchers within the contexts of other studies. While these sources were very useful, I was not able to fully determine the conditions within which the interviews were conducted and any limitations related to such conditions.

Additionally, the study has had to rely on very limited to non-existent information in relation to former girl soldiers' responses to the case study films. There was limited information on former girl soldiers' responses to *Flame*, but no information on their responses to *Heart of Fire* and *War Witch*. The researcher was also not able to access information on how girls who participated in the anti-apartheid struggle responded to *Sarafina!*.

I am also of the opinion that studying films representing the same conflict at the same historical time but produced within different production and consumption contexts would have been very illuminating. This is because the films would have served as each other's "controls" and thus offer a more nuanced study of the influences of production and consumption contexts on the representations of girls who participate in African political conflicts. Such an approach was not possible because of the lack of films that fit the category. I took an approach similar to this when I analysed *Sarafina!*, but looked at the play on which the film is based rather than another film. This approach proved very useful because the author was able to look at how the same story was retold under different circumstances. But

the fact that the two media, film and play, have different production processes may have heightened or concealed some of the issues that were considered.

For further study, I recommend an extensive research into the responses of girls who participated in African political conflicts to find out the extent to which they see their experiences and identities represented in these films. Also, perhaps one day it will be possible to study films focusing on girl soldiers which are set within the same conflict at the same historical time but produced within different production and consumption contexts

Despite these limitations, this study remains significant because it is one of the very few that have paid attention to the filmic representations of girls who participate in African political conflicts. What follows is a summary of the themes raised in Chapters One to Six and some concluding remarks.

The Girls' Voices

Former girl soldiers' narratives such as those found in Senait Mehari's (2006) memoir and in the book *Women of Resilience: The Voices of Women Ex-combatants*, published by Zimbabwe Women Writers in 2000, offer particularly gendered perspectives that challenge the idea that girls are simply helpless victims of irregular soldiers. They also provide nuanced details that go beyond the image of the "girl as hero." These narratives, therefore, demonstrate the necessity for girl soldiers or former girl soldiers to tell their own stories. Films are more expensive to make and therefore are beyond the reach of many who may wish to express themselves through this medium. As a result, the films that represent the experiences of girl soldiers are very few, and the representations are not always from the perspectives of the girl soldiers. For instance, some former girl soldiers who participated in

the Zimbabwean war of liberation were disappointed that *Flame* represented a rather sanitised version of their experiences (Lyons, 2004; Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000).¹⁶⁵

The fact that *Sarafina!*, *Flame*, *Heart of Fire* and *War Witch* focus on the experiences of girl soldiers, or girls who participate in African political conflicts, makes the films very significant. This is because they bring to the fore identities and experiences that are often overlooked in representations of wars. But, at the same time, the representations in these films are structured within the context of complex power dynamics. These power dynamics are reflected within the films' production and consumption contexts, and function at personal, national and global levels to disadvantage the girls these films represent.

Personal Influences

At the personal level are issues concerned with how filmmakers relate to the stories they tell and to the people they represent. Filmmakers are members of particular social groups, and their socialisation influences the way they see the world, and thus, the way they see girl soldiers. Their perceptions, in turn, influence the way they approach their filmmaking processes. For example, it may not be mere coincidence that *Sarafina!*, which is directed by a male filmmaker, offers a largely male perspective of girls and women that, to an extent, stereotypes them as mothers and nurturers, whereas *Flame*, which is directed by a woman, offers a narrative that is presented largely from a woman's perspective. Or that Luigi Falorni, a male director, overlooks the particularly gendered experiences that Senait Mehari, a woman, explores in her memoir.

¹⁶⁵ Responses to the film were varied. For instance, one former girl soldier, Mavis Ntathi, was of the opinion that the film misrepresented the experiences of girl soldiers because she never witnessed any sexual harassment (Zimbabwe Women Writers, 2000: 153). But the underlying theme among most of the responses seems to be the questioning of the film's "truthfulness" to the realities of girl soldiers in the Zimbabwe Liberation War.

But, being directed by a woman does not ensure that a film provides the perspective of the specific girls it represents. For example, *Flame* represents the experiences of girl soldiers but from a middle-class perspective. As such, the voice of the rural and poor girl is silenced as her actions are interpreted from a position of privilege. For instance, Florence's poverty is largely explained through her own actions rather than her social conditions. Although social conditions may have played a part, Nyasha's constant disapproval of Florence's actions indicate that perhaps things could have been different if she had made better choices and made better plans for her future.

Additionally, *War Witch* proves that although female directors may have certain sensibilities, being a woman is not necessarily a prerequisite for providing girl soldiers' perspectives. Kim Nguyen's approach indicates that a male filmmaker can be just as committed as a female filmmaker when it comes to providing the perspectives of girl soldiers. Nguyen places a lot of significance in the "I" that identifies a girl soldier, and this is reflected in the way he attempts to see the world through Komona's eyes, although he is not always successful.

Thus, the intersection of factors such as a filmmaker's age, gender, cultural experiences and social class influences the way the filmmaker represents identities. The fact that filmmakers' identity markers do not often coincide with those of girl soldiers means that the girls are usually represented from other people's perspectives.

National Influences

At the national level, are issues to do with the construction of national identity and history. Conditions within a certain country may determine or influence the kinds of filmic

representations at a particular point in time. The representations may conform to the dominant constructions of national history or challenge them. For example, *Sarafina!* places a lot of significance in non-violent methods of conflict resolution, a strategy which can be linked to the film's production context. The film was produced at a time when violence was viewed as an impediment to the negotiations that aimed at creating a democratic South Africa. In such conditions, girls' stereotypical image as nurturers and averse to violence became very useful, and, as a result, the film overlooks the more nuanced experiences of girls who participated in the anti-apartheid struggle. This is not to suggest that the filmmakers were mere puppets of the political elite. The filmmakers may have carefully considered the socio-political conditions within which they were working and saw themselves as having a responsibility to not fuel any violence. In any case, girls' voices were silenced in favour of a more symbolic representation that promoted nation building.

On the other hand, *Flame* challenged the mainstream nationalist narrative. This was partly possible because the film was made at a time when postcolonial disillusionment was on the rise in Zimbabwe. With many people voicing their discontent, the producers of *Flame* found a perfect moment to draw attention to the plight of some former girl soldiers who had been silenced for many years following the end of the liberation war. But challenging the mainstream narrative does not necessarily mean the film is more representative of girl soldiers' voices than a film such as *Sarafina!*. This is because political agendas often mean the prioritisation of certain voices and the marginalisation of others. For instance, in its bid to make a political legitimacy claim for women, *Flame* prioritises the experiences of the few girls who participated in combat activities over girls who provided non-combat services, despite the fact that these were in the majority.

In addition, conditions within a specific country may also influence the extent to which filmmakers are effective in challenging the dominant ideas. The representations in *Flame*, for instance, were complicated by the fact that the film was subjected to direct and indirect censorship through, for example, the male actors on set and government officials. The filmmakers had to make some compromises which, in some cases, meant “watering-down” the voices of some of the former girl soldiers.

There are, however, some situations in which national influences are not as strong. This was the case with *Heart of Fire*. When the Eritrean government and its supporters threatened those who were working on the film, the film’s producers moved the shooting of the film to Kenya. But, of course, this only works if the funders are willing and able to fund such a move. And, as shall be discussed in the next section, funding for films often comes with strings attached.

War Witch, by virtue of not “naming and shaming” any specific government or political parties, managed to evade some forms of national control and influence. The film is not set in a specific African country and is funded through international institutions. But this also means Africans, and especially the girl soldiers, do not have much control over the way they are represented in the film. They are left at the mercy of global and other influences.

Global Influences

At the global level, are influences of global power dynamics, which are linked to colonial and neo-colonial histories. In this context, the rich and powerful countries often have more say over the ways identities of people in the poor parts of the world are constructed. African countries are often not in a position to fund high budget films with a wider international

reach, and therefore are unable to influence the representations of identities on film. Most of the times filmmakers have to make some compromises in order to attract international funding so that they can make their films. This can be seen, for example, with *Sarafina!*, which only managed to attract Hollywood funding after signing up the Hollywood star, Whoopi Goldberg. Or *Flame*, which was funded through the Media for Development Trust, whose funding meant the film had to emphasise African women's development issues. Or *Heart of Fire* and *War Witch*, whose representations fall within the humanitarian discourse that many analysts argue has become a tool in global politics. The humanitarian discourse often presents a very pessimistic view of Africa and Africans, which hide the impact of colonial and neo-colonial influences on the conditions of Africans. In this situation, girl soldiers become victims of senseless wars.

The result of all these influences is that girls who participate in African political conflicts end up having little control over how their histories and stories are constructed on film. Their representations are heavily influenced by other people's perceptions about their gender roles, the societies within which they exist, and the wars they fight in. These perceptions in turn influence representations of the girls' agency.

Agency

As discussed in Chapter One, the issue of agency in relation to children is very complex. There are questions regarding the level of agency children can really have considering that their cognitive and analytical skills are not fully developed. However, this does not really seem to be a major issue where girls who participated in anti-colonial struggles are concerned. These girls are imbued with both strategic and tactical agency as they make a conscious decision to participate in fighting for their nation's future. This makes them

complex political victims, as defined by Erica Bouris (2007). In contrast, *Heart of Fire* and *War Witch* represent girls who participate in postcolonial wars as mostly operating at the level of tactical agency, thus, they are largely ideal victims, although they may not be helpless.¹⁶⁶

The level of agency has implications on the way the identities of these girls are defined. Instead of being defined through their own experiences and actions, their identities become a reflection of the way their societies are viewed. When a society is seen as fighting a just war, the girls are defined by a high level of political consciousness, and their actions perceived as heroic. On the other hand, in a society judged to be fighting an unjust war, the girls become victims who mostly fight because they are forced to.

Girls who participate in wars that are considered justified become representations of the “good” that is fighting “evil.” We can see this in *Sarafina!*, in which Sarafina goes through a process of political conscientisation which results in her joining the anti-apartheid struggle. Justification of the struggle is achieved through visualisations of the brutality of the apartheid government’s security forces. Similarly, Florence in *Flame* is also represented as politically conscious, and the war in which she fights is justified by the need to overthrow colonial rule. But the “good” versus “evil” approach results in a more symbolic representation of girls rather than a nuanced exploration of their experiences. In addition, *Sarafina!* and *Flame* demonstrate that such representations are influenced by the demands of the films’ production context. Although *Sarafina!* represents the youth uprising of the mid-1970s to 1980s, Sarafina becomes a symbol for nation building as per the demands of the political situation in

¹⁶⁶ The two films deviate from “the single story,” as defined by Catarina Martins (2011), by representing the girl soldier as having some agency, although very limited, instead of making her a helpless victim.

the early 1990s, when the film was made. Florence, on the other hand, becomes a symbol for postcolonial disillusionment in line with the Zimbabwean socio-political context of the 1990s. The result is that the experiences of the girls who participated in these conflicts are subordinated to the political objectives of the films.

On the other hand, the girl soldier of African postcolonial wars is largely represented as a victim of senseless wars. This is partly because African postcolonial wars are framed within a view that holds the sanctity of colonial borders and sees civil wars as state-breaking instead of arising from people's desire to enforce their rights (Bereketeab, 2016). The dominant perceptions on African postcolonial wars have also been linked to the racist characterisation of Africans as incapable of self-determination. *Heart of Fire* and *War Witch* are examples of representations framed within these perceptions. In these films, the wars are not contextualised meaningfully and are characterised by an element of perpetuity. In this sense, girl soldiers become victims of the savagery they are born into rather than a temporary situation that can potentially be resolved. In *Heart of Fire*, the justified war between the Eritreans and the Ethiopian government is resolved whereas the war between the ELF and the EPLF is not. In *War Witch*, the war is also not resolved, which leaves Komona's future uncertain.

Given that many civil wars go on for many years, perhaps this is a more "realistic" representation, but what is important for this study is that at the end of both *Heart of Fire* and *War Witch*, the films shift from the perspectives of the girls to provide a more "objective" view of the situation. In other words, the filmmakers, not the girls, have the last word, and the girls' stories are framed within the filmmakers' views. Although both films do not explicitly call for an intervention, it is implied by the fact that the Africans themselves have failed to

end the war. The case for *Heart of Fire* is even more pronounced because adults fail or abandon Awet so that she is, to a great extent, left to fend for herself.

Another significant issue related to the representation of girls who participate in African political conflicts is the girls' relationship to the nation. This is largely influenced by the intersection of gender, age, and perceptions about the wars.

Girls and the Nation

In anti-colonial struggles, when the girl attacks, it is in defence of her nation, and her attack is often provoked. For instance, in *Sarafina!*, Sarafina becomes an active participant in the anti-apartheid struggle after witnessing the brutality of apartheid rule. In *Flame*, we see Flame shooting a white soldier who has just killed her fellow liberation fighter, and she also shoots a jeep with soldiers coming from attacking a village. In many ways, the violence perpetrated by girls who participate in anti-colonial struggles is spurred by the cruelty of the system they are fighting. The fact that girls, who are stereotypically seen as averse to violence, are pushed to acting so violently, serves to highlight the cruelty and evil nature of oppressive rule.

However, the girls' relationship to the nation is very much linked to perceptions about their gender roles. For instance, in *Sarafina!*, Sarafina ventures out of domesticity to join the nationalist struggle, but this is only represented as temporary. The film indicates that the end of the war should signal a return to "normal." The film does not imagine a role for women in post-apartheid South Africa. It can therefore be argued that the film represents the relationship between girls/women and the nation from a male perspective. On the other hand, *Flame* aims to reclaim women's political legitimacy in postcolonial Zimbabwe. But the film

does so within masculinised definitions of “hero” by justifying the claim through the argument that women were also involved in combat activities during the liberation war.

In representations of postcolonial wars, the issue of nationalism is framed within the question: What nation? The girls who participate in these wars are denied any sense of nationhood, and their pain and suffering become evidence of state failure. In *Heart of Fire*, Awet’s sense of nationhood is eroded upon the realisation that the military unit she belongs to is more focused on fighting another Eritrean military organisation rather than the Ethiopian government. In *War Witch*, the government is incapable of protecting its citizens, including children, and therefore not in a position to create a sense of nationhood. Caught up within the context of a failed state, the girls fight for their survival rather than for their nation. Additionally, the girls do not choose to fight, but are forced to. The implication is that the girls are turned into monsters who kill against their will. In addition to being forced to kill, girls are subjected to other forms of physical and emotional abuse, including rape. Awet in *Heart of Fire* is able to maintain her innocence because she manages to choose not to kill, and she is not subjected to rape, but she still has to fight for her survival. On the other hand, Komona, in *War Witch*, even shoots the backs of those running away, and she does this while ‘hyped up on drugs,’ and in the name of Great Tiger, the warlord, rather than the nation.¹⁶⁷

In relation to the idea of nationalism, the differences between the representations of girls who fight in the anti-colonial struggles and those who fight in postcolonial wars indicate that the girls are used symbolically to make judgements about the wars in which they fight as well as their societies.

¹⁶⁷ Komona is however represented as justified in killing her rapist.

Does all this Matter?

The perspective from which narratives about girl soldiers are told matters. The challenge that many theorists and analysts have levelled against the humanitarian approach to representing the pain of others has a lot to do with the issue of perspective (Coulter, 2008; Edmondson, 2005; Martins, 2011). Perspectives are framed within power relations and, as such, dominant perspectives tend to be those of the rich and/or powerful rather than the poor and powerless. Additionally, dominant perspectives often define the affected poor as recipients of solutions rather than active contributors. The result is that sometimes solutions are imposed by those with a limited understanding of what the problem is rather than decided upon through meaningful engagement with those affected. This limits the effectiveness of solutions. For instance, the solution suggested in *Heart of Fire* is an escape to Europe, which eliminates any search for a solution within Africa.

Stories from the perspectives of girl soldiers have greater potential to broaden our understanding of their experiences. The girls' voices might help to foster meaningful engagement between them and the wider society, and thus create a space where change might just be possible.

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